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The Quality and Effects of Secondary Transition Plans on Special Education Graduates'  
Postsecondary Outcomes and Their Effects on Secondary Transition

By  
Vickie Miller

A Dissertation Submitted to the  
Gardner-Webb University School of Education  
in Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

Gardner-Webb University  
2013

## Approval Page

This dissertation was submitted by Vickie Miller under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Gardner-Webb University School of Education and was approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Gardner-Webb University.

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## **Abstract**

The Quality and Effects of Secondary Transition Plans on Special Education Graduates' Postsecondary Outcomes and Their Effects on Secondary Transition. Miller, Vickie, 2013: Dissertation, Gardner-Webb University, Special Education/Secondary Transition Plans/Postsecondary Outcomes/High School

The purpose of the study was to determine whether or not the implementation of special education graduates' secondary transition plans by a team of supporters such as teachers, parents, administrators, and postsecondary mentors were well-constructed and in alignment with the graduates' high school curriculum and intended postsecondary goals, as well as whether the supporters followed through with helping the graduates achieve those postsecondary goals. The study also examined whether a loop existed between linking the secondary transition plans (indicator 13) to the postsecondary outcomes (indicator 14) and the feedback from the postsecondary outcomes back to the transition plans.

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, there are 20 indicators under the state performance plan that school districts are required to adhere to if receiving federal funding. Indicators 13 and 14 make up the transition requirements that school districts are required to implement and report on. Indicator 13 is defined as the percentage of high school students age 16 and above with an Individual Education Plan (IEP) in which appropriate measurable postsecondary goals are updated every year based upon students' transition service needs, age appropriate transition assessments, transition services, and curriculum and instruction that will enable the students to meet postsecondary goals. Indicator 14 is defined as the percentage of students who had high school IEPs and are competitively employed, enrolled at a postsecondary institution, or both within a year of leaving high school. The results of the study indicated that the loop linking Indicators 13 and 14 was virtually nonexistent and the secondary transition plans were inadequate.

## Table of Contents

	<b>Page</b>
Chapter 1: Statement of the Problem .....	1
Problem Statement .....	4
Research Questions .....	6
Context of the Problem .....	6
Purpose Statement .....	8
Conceptual Framework .....	9
Significance of Problem .....	17
Limitations .....	19
Delimitations .....	19
Operational Definitions .....	20
Summary .....	23
Chapter 2: Literature Review .....	24
Introduction .....	24
Legislation Governing Special Education Transition .....	25
Transition Plans and Services .....	27
Transition Assessments .....	30
Transition Activities.....	33
Curriculum and Instruction .....	35
Postsecondary Outcomes .....	36
Special Education Teacher Perceptions .....	43
Postsecondary Mentors' Roles .....	45
Family Perceptions .....	46
Summary .....	49
Chapter 3: Research Methodology .....	51
Introduction .....	51
Research Questions .....	52
Information Needed .....	54
Location of Information.....	55
Information Collection .....	55
Timeline .....	61
Use of Information.....	62
Proposed Findings.....	64
Summary .....	64
Chapter 4: Results .....	66
Introduction .....	66
Research Question 1 .....	67
Research Question 2 .....	74
Research Question 3 .....	79
Research Question 4 .....	108
Summary .....	111
Chapter 5: Discussions.....	112
Introduction.....	112
Conclusions.....	112
Discussions .....	119

Implications for Practice .....	122
Conceptual Framework Findings .....	123
Limitations .....	126
Recommendations .....	127
Summary .....	128
References .....	132
Appendices	
A Parent Survey .....	139
B Administrator Survey .....	142
C Teacher Survey .....	144
D Postsecondary Mentor Survey .....	147
E Permission to Use the National Post-School Outcomes Center Instrument .....	150
F Permission to Use the National Study of Transition Policies and Practices in State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies Instrument .....	152
G Permission to Use the I-13 IEP Compliance Feedback Form Instrument .....	154
H Consent Form .....	156
Tables	
1 Keywords and Phrases Found in Transition Plans .....	68
2 Transition Plans Ratings .....	70
3 Transition Plan Template .....	72
4 Transition Plan Curriculum Alignment .....	76
5 Parent Survey Closed-Ended Responses .....	80
6 Parent Survey Open-Ended Responses: Transition Planning Follow-up .....	82
7 Parent Survey Open-Ended Responses: Experiences with Teachers and Postsecondary Mentors .....	82
8 Parent Survey Open-Ended Responses: Additional Information .....	83
9 Administrator Survey Closed-Ended Responses .....	85
10 Teacher Survey Closed-Ended Responses .....	89
11 Teacher Survey Open-Ended Responses: Role of Transition Planning on Outcomes .....	92
12 Teacher Survey Open-Ended Responses: Attitudes and Perceptions .....	94
13 Teacher Survey Open-Ended Responses: Follow-up .....	95
14 Teacher Survey Open-Ended Responses: Additional Information .....	96
15 Postsecondary Mentor Survey Closed-Ended Responses .....	100
16 Postsecondary Mentor Survey Opened-Ended Responses: Role of Transition Planning on Graduates' Outcomes .....	104
17 Postsecondary Mentor Survey Opened-Ended Responses: Postsecondary Follow-up .....	105
18 Postsecondary Mentor Survey Opened-Ended Responses: Additional Information .....	106
Figures	
1 Halpern's (1985) Model of Transition .....	10
2 Bronfenbrenner's (1998) Ecological Theory Model .....	13
3 Kohler's (1996) Taxonomy of Transition Services .....	15
4 Research Conceptual Framework .....	17
5 Study Methodology .....	52
6 Study Design .....	64

7	Modified Conceptual Framework .....	124
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## **Chapter 1: Statement of the Problem**

Several challenges face special education students in the transition from the relatively protective secondary school environment to the more challenging and less protective adult environment that they enter after graduation. Such challenges include the fact that special education students often lag behind their nondisabled peers in employment and educational opportunities (Clark, 1996; Gil, 2007; Kochhar-Bryant & Izzo, 2006). Of the special education students who ultimately graduate from college, it often takes them double the time to complete their degrees in comparison to their nondisabled peers (Kochhar-Bryant & Izzo, 2006). Special education students are less likely to obtain employment, education, or income on the same level as their nondisabled counterparts (Clark, 1996; Clark & Unruh, 2010). Although some research reveals that more special education students have more access to services that help with securing postsecondary education and employment placement, many students are not aware of the services or properly prepared to access the services (Lane, Carter, & Sisco, 2012). Many of the postsecondary challenges that special education students face are linked to poor preparation for postsecondary success as a result of poor secondary transition planning (Gil, 2007; Oertle & Trach, 2007).

According to federal law, transition services must be provided to high school special education students to help them achieve postsecondary outcomes in academia or employment (Yell, Shriner, & Katsiyannis, 2006). Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), transition services should be results-oriented and focus on improving the academic and functional achievement of special education students to facilitate their movement from secondary activities to postsecondary activities (IDEA, 1990). In North Carolina, the North Carolina Supreme Court ruled that every

student is entitled to a sound basic education that enables them to engage in successful postsecondary outcomes (*Leandro v. State*, 1997). The results of this ruling emphasized that every student, not just regular education students, have a right to a sound education to include:

1. Sufficient ability to read, write, and speak English and a sufficient knowledge of fundamental mathematics and physical science to enable a student to function in a complex and rapidly changing society.
2. Sufficient fundamental knowledge of geography, history, and basic economic and political systems to enable a student to make informed choices on issues that affect the student personally.
3. Sufficient academic and vocational skills for a student to successfully engage in postsecondary education or vocational training.
4. Sufficient academic and vocational skills for a student to compete in further education or work in contemporary society. (p. 13)

Under the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Improvement Act (Perkins Act, 2006), schools are held accountable for the graduation, postsecondary education, and employment outcomes of students enrolled in career and technical education classes. The Perkins Act (2006) allows for all students including special education students to take part in quality vocational programs at the secondary level. One of the important components of the Perkins Act (2006) is that it “promotes the development of services and activities that integrate rigorous and challenging academic and career and technical instruction, and that link secondary education and postsecondary education for participating career and technical education students” (p. 684). Every component of the Perkins Act (2006) is important; however, this particular component

emphasizes the importance of preparing all career and technical education (CTE) students, including special education students in CTE classes, for postsecondary careers and education which is very similar to the function of the secondary transition plan for special education students.

Such laws parallel the mandates of the IDEA (2004) by requiring educators to support students in the transition planning process (Oertle & Trach, 2007). Secondary transition services must provide activities that promote postsecondary employment, vocational training, independent living, community participation, and education based on the needs of the students. According to the IDEA (1990), schools must include successful individual transition plans in students' individual education plans (IEP) that are monitored by state and local school districts while students are in high school and after graduation. School districts are responsible for adhering to 20 indicators under the IDEA (2004), and two of those indicators known as Indicators 13 and 14 govern the success of transition plans for special education students.

According to the IDEA (1990), students must have transition services included on their IEP beginning at age 16 along with appropriate postsecondary goals that include employment, education, and independent living as well as assistance from the school in obtaining the transition services needed to reach the postsecondary goals, which all make up Indicators 13 and 14. Indicator 13 called for students 16 and above to have an active transition plan included in their IEP. Under the IDEA (2004), Indicator 13 stated:

Percent of youth with IEPs aged 16 and above with an IEP that includes appropriate measurable postsecondary goals that are annually updated and based upon an age appropriate transition assessment, transition services, including courses of study, that will reasonably enable the student to meet those

postsecondary goals, and annual IEP goals related to the student's transition services needs. There also must be evidence that the student was invited to the IEP Team meeting where transition services are to be discussed and evidence that, if appropriate, a representative of any participating agency was invited to the IEP Team meeting with the prior consent of the parent or student who has reached the age of majority. (p. 118)

Indicator 14 followed up with how successful special education graduates are with their postsecondary activities. Under the IDEA (2004), Indicator 14 stated:

Percent of youth who are no longer in secondary school, had IEPs in effect at the time they left school, and were: (a) enrolled in higher education within one year of leaving high school (b) enrolled in higher education or competitively employed within one year of leaving high school (c) enrolled in higher education or in some other postsecondary education or competitively employed or in some other employment within one year of leaving high school. (p. 118)

Indicator 13 is best described as the input during high school that involves providing students with a transition plan that includes measurable goals and transition services that will enable students to meet the postsecondary goals laid out in their transition plan (Schmitz, 2008). Indicator 14 is considered the output during the postsecondary level in which students successfully gain employment, enroll in a postsecondary institution, or both after high school (Schmitz, 2008).

### **Problem Statement**

Although, Indicator 14 under Part B of the State Performance Plan and Annual Performance Report requires states to collect and report on the number of students enrolled in some form of postsecondary education or competitively employed within 1

year after leaving high school, there are few regulations linking these postsecondary outcomes to the secondary transition plan of the students. Currently, little to no data exist linking postsecondary outcomes to secondary transition plans resulting in few comparisons between the intended input of Indicator 13 to the actual output of Indicator 14. Research shows that students secure more desirable postsecondary outcomes when they experience a successful transition planning process (Clark, 1996; Oertle & Trach, 2007; Stodden, 2005). Such a process involves collaboration among students, parents, teachers, and interagency personnel in helping to prepare quality transition plans aligned with the students' curriculum and postsecondary goals along with continued support from the collaborators after high school in helping the student to achieve the set postsecondary goals (Oertle & Trach, 2007).

Although some school districts receive feedback from state surveys (typically performed on their districts at random) about post-school outcomes to utilize for continuous progress monitoring, there is no direct connection linking the input of Indicator 13 to the output of Indicator 14. Several key ingredients are missing in establishing a loop between linking the secondary transition plan to the postsecondary outcomes and the feedback from the postsecondary outcomes back to the transition plan. The missing ingredients include (1) the lack of systematic assessment of the quality of transition plans, (2) the lack of systemic assessment of the curriculum alignment of the plan's intended outcomes to the student's program of studies while in high school, (3) the lack of direct connection linking the input of Indicator 13 to the output of Indicator 14, (4) the lack of regular and systematic follow-up to determine short-term or long-term effects of the link between Indicators 13 and 14, and (5) the lack of defined and systematic practice for using follow-up postsecondary data to adjust and improve the use of

transition plans in the secondary setting. Many of the post-school outcome surveys ask broad questions relating to the transition plan such as “did anyone talk to you about what you planned to do when you left high school” and “did anyone help you to set career goals when you were in high school” (Alverson, Unruh, Rowe, & Kellems, 2011). Such broad questions mainly focus on outcomes of Indicator 14 and do not get at the details of the effectiveness of the students’ transition plans, hence making no connection between Indicator 13 and Indicator 14. Therefore, the question arises as to whether secondary transition plans actually make a difference in the success of special education students at the postsecondary level relative to the intended consequences of Indicator 13. This results in the system of transition planning missing out on major improvement opportunities because limited data exist to help the system improve.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions used to guide the study were:

1. How does the quality of the secondary transition plan meet the proposed criteria for a sound plan?
2. How did the implementation of the curriculum design aligned with the transition plan help prepare special education students while they were in high school for meeting postsecondary challenges?
3. What are the perceived influences that parents, administrators, teachers, and postsecondary mentors provided in the transitional planning process and their outcomes?
4. What postsecondary successes occurred outside the scope of the secondary transition plan and what factors contributed to those successes?

### **Context of the Problem**

The *normalization* principle introduced by Nirje in 1969 focused on person-

centered planning and community-based opportunities for people with disabilities which led to more education and research on the transition services needed for more successful postsecondary outcomes (Oertle & Trach, 2007). A plethora of research exists on the need for successful transition planning to prepare special education students for postsecondary success (Clark, 1996; Clark & Unruh, 2010; Collet-Klingenberg & Kolb, 2011; Gil, 2007; Morningstar & Liss, 2008). Historically, several legislative mandates such as the IDEA (1990, 2004), Education of All Children Handicapped Act, the Rehabilitation Act, and the Americans with Disabilities Act have sought to *level the playing field* for students with special needs in education, employment, and independent living as well as ensure their rights (Stodden, 2005). Such laws have allowed for more accessibility to societal norms such as postsecondary education and competitive employment for special education students after graduating from high school. According to Lane et al. (2012), an increasing number of special education students are graduating from high school and gaining more access to postsecondary education and employment.

However, the enrollment rate of special education students in postsecondary institutions is still far lower than the enrollment rate of their nondisabled peers, and the unemployment rate of special education students is far higher than that of their nondisabled peers preventing these students from becoming productive members of society (Clark, 1996; Webb, Patterson, & Syverud, 2008). Many special education students graduate from high school and end up living at home with their parents because they are not adequately prepared to live independently, to find employment, or to enroll in a postsecondary institution (Hogansen, Powers, Geenen, Gil-Kashiwabara, & Powers, 2008). Research shows that the lack of preparation for postsecondary success for many special education students is the result of poor transition planning at the secondary level

(Gill, 2007; Neubert, Moon, & Grigal, 2002; Oertle & Trach, 2007). According to *Leandro v. State* (1997), all students have the right to a sound basic education that includes arming them with the skills to allow them to successfully engage in postsecondary education and employment. However, if special education students are graduating from high school without proper preparation to meet postsecondary challenges, their *Leandro* rights are being violated.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study was to seek to utilize the results to go beyond mere compliance of the law to better serve the needs of special education students transitioning from high school to adulthood. Federal and state laws require that special education students leave high school prepared for competitive employment, higher education, and independent living; however, many special education students are underserved from the legal and moral perspective in that they are not always as well prepared for postsecondary life as their nondisabled peers (IDEA, 1990; *Leandro v. State*, 1997). Many transition plans only serve as written documents to comply with the laws and are not serving their intended purpose of leveling the playing field for special education students so that they can access the same postsecondary successes of their nondisabled peers if they desire. Until transition plans and the entire transition process are approached in a more competent and helpful manner by teachers, parents, students, administrators, and postsecondary mentors, special education students will continue to be placed at a disadvantage after graduation.

This study examined the quality of transition plans, the curriculum alignment of transition plans, the use of postsecondary feedback to improve transition plans, the link between input Indicator 13 and output Indicator 14 as well as the short-term and long-



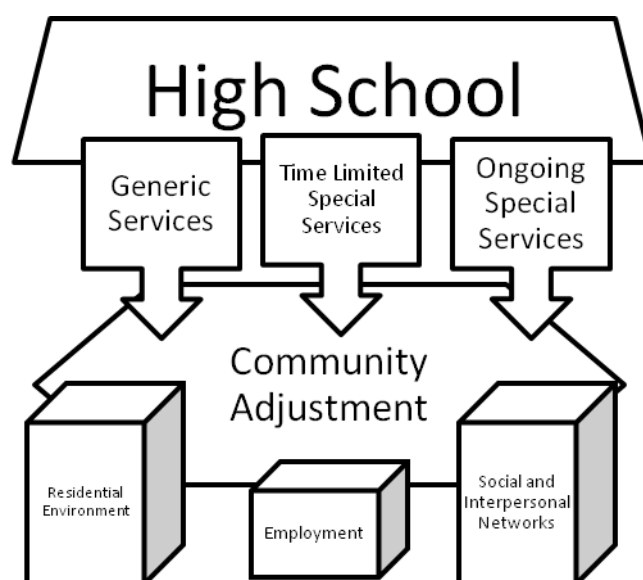
term effects of the link between Indicators 13 and 14. This study assessed the quality of transition plans according to a set of previously listed external best practices criteria taken from a combination of the National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center (NSTTAC, 2008) Indicator 13 checklist, the IDEA (1990) regulations, and Johnson's (2003) *Parent and Family Guide to Transition Education and Planning*. The study also examined the perceptions of the teachers, parents, and postsecondary mentors regarding the effects of the transition plans on student success in postsecondary settings as well as the effects that can inform programs and planning improvement in high school.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Secondary transition plans were designed so that special education students would become more independent (Dragoo, 2006). Therefore, it is significant for educators to become familiar with successful transition models for special education students such as the historical Will (1984) model, Halpern (1985) model, Bronfenbrenner (1998) model, and the Kohler (1996) model.

At the start of the transition movement in 1983, the Assistant Secretary of the United States Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, Madeleine Will (1984) defined transition as an outcome leading to employment via a broad array of services and experiences (Whetstone & Browning, 2002). Will went on to develop a transition model that focused on school-to-work with an emphasis on special education students ages 16 and above (Johnson, 2003). Will stressed that special education students needed services and support over time that may be time-limited, ongoing, or not needed at all as they transitioned from high school to employment. This model mainly focused on preparing students for the world of work after graduation as a postsecondary success (Johnson, 2003; Will, 1984).

In 1985, Halpern expanded upon Will's (1984) original definition of transition being an outcome-oriented process leading to employment (Halpern, 1993). The Halpern (1985) model not only focuses on employment but it consists of several factors that help contribute to the postsecondary success of special education students such as residential, interpersonal, and social outcomes which are often addressed on individual transition plans (Halpern, Herr, Doren, & Wolf, 1997). Halpern's (1985) model builds upon the fact that certain services throughout high school that may be time limited or ongoing are needed in order for students to access the community through social and interpersonal networks that lead to productive employment and independent living skills.



*Figure 1.* Halpern's (1985) Model of Transition.

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Halpern went on to add self-esteem to the federal definition of transition in 1989 (Whetstone & Browning, 2002). Halpern felt that factors such as self-esteem and empowering students to select their own goals and make decisions were an important part of the transition process (Whetstone & Browning, 2002). However, Halpern found that between 25% and 50% of students' transition needs were not addressed during the

transition planning process (Hosp, Griller-Clark, & Rutherford, 2001). Researchers using the Halpern (1985) model to perform a study on the post-school outcomes of special education graduates in the southeastern area of the United States found that service providers such as teachers often do not believe that special education students can do things on their own such as live independently, attend postsecondary institutions, or hold a job which leads to lack of support for the students and low expectations from the students (Curtis, Rabren & Reilly, 2009).

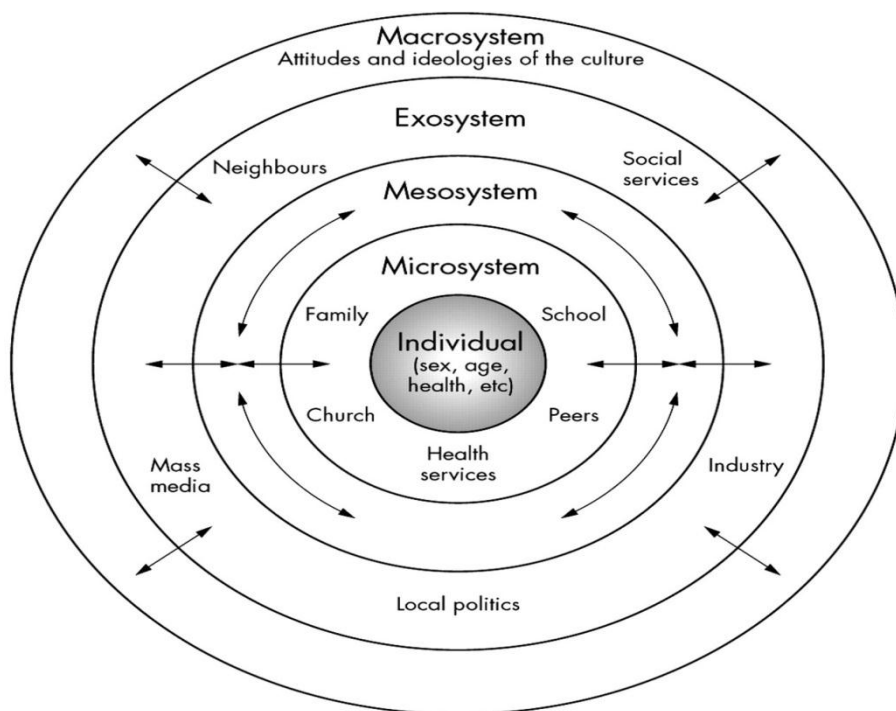
The later model also incorporates a perspective on transition services in relation to transition plans and focuses on transitioning to an independent adult life in which Halpern coined *quality of life* (Halpern et al., 1997). Halpern measured post-school outcomes through the quality of life which he defined through content domains consisting of (1) physical and material well-being, (2) performance of a variety of adult roles, and (3) a sense of personal fulfillment (Curtis et al., 2009). Under these three domains, Halpern identified content areas for the quality of life such as the areas of (1) physical and mental health, (2) food, clothing, lodging, and (3) financial security under the physical and material well-being domain. The content areas under the performance of a variety of adult roles domain consist of (1) mobility and community access, (2) leisure and recreation, (3) career and employment, (4) relationships and social networks, and (5) education attainment. Satisfaction and general well-being complete the list of content areas under the personal fulfillment domain. According to Halpern (1993), “each of these content areas should be considered minimal conditions that help to establish a foundation for a satisfactory quality of life” (p. 488). Research shows that students with a high quality of life are more apt to accomplish personal goals, pursue higher education, and employment (Halpern, 1993; Scorgie, Kildal, & Wilgosh, 2010). Halpern’s (1993)

goal was for special education students to gain access to the same advantages as their nondisabled peers, and he pointed out that transition plans and outcomes should focus on the quality of life which provides a strong framework for evaluating transition programs and outcomes.

Halpern's (1985) model of transition established a foundational framework of the special education transition process in that it has been largely adopted as the basis for defining transition services because it builds upon community participation, community living, and employment that create a solid foundation for needed transition support services (Whetstone & Browning, 2002). Halpern emphasized the importance of transition planning in post-school success for special education students. He noted instruction in vocational and career development skills, participation in mainstream vocational education classes, secondary education paid work experiences, and student participation in transition planning are essential to postsecondary success (Hosp et al., 2001).

Other transition models, such as Bronfenbrenner's (1998), have also provided the operational framework from which to design transition plans and services. The Bronfenbrenner transition theory is guided by the ecological model of development in that it indicates that the development of children is directly influenced by the various settings that they are exposed to as well as the amount of time that they are exposed to the settings. Bronfenbrenner focused on the whole child approach and the interconnectedness of a child's environment and experiences on their overall life. Bronfenbrenner indicated that as a child develops and his or her physical and cognitive structures grow and mature, the interaction within his or her environments becomes more complex. According to his theory, if the 16 relationships in the microsystem break down

(which includes school and family), the child will not have the tools to explore other parts of his or her environment such as work or industry in the exosystem, thus impacting his or her development and leading to the inability to provide self-direction (Bronfenbrenner, 1998). Therefore if students do not receive the tools that they need within their secondary environment to explore the postsecondary environment, they will face many challenges. Similar to the Bronfenbrenner theory, the transition planning process is designed to focus on the whole child approach in addressing the social, emotional, cognitive, and physical needs of the students as they prepare for postsecondary challenges.



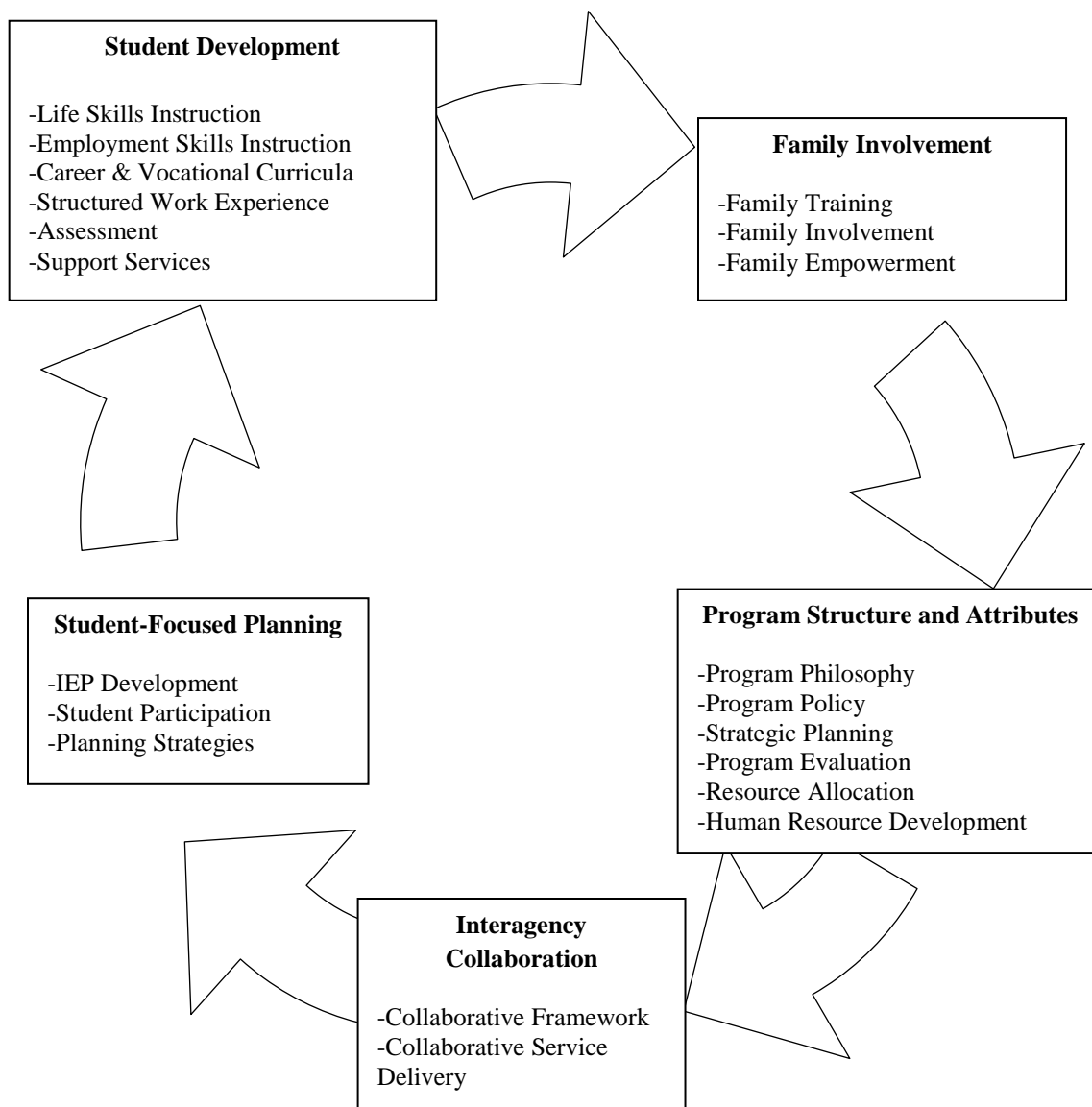
*Figure 2.* Bronfenbrenner's (1998) Ecological Theory Model.

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The Kohler (1996) model is based on a taxonomy that points out that the transition planning process should involve all possible adult roles, responsibilities,

activities, and settings that a special education student may encounter in the adult world.

The taxonomy consists of five major aspects known as student development, family involvement, program structure and attributes, interagency collaboration, and student-focused planning that are broken down into subcategories of specific transition activities and transition practice descriptors (Kellums & Morningstar, 2010). Kohler focused specifically on the transition process versus the transition outcomes of Halpern's (1985) model. Kohler outlined in detail the transition services that Halpern alluded to in his model that are needed to bring about successful transition outcomes.



*Figure 3. Kohler's (1996) Taxonomy of Transition Services.*

All four models have been instrumental in establishing a theoretical framework for the secondary transition planning process and focus on how to prepare students for success in adult life. Also, a link can be established between the input of Indicator 13 and the output of Indicator 14 because through the four models there is an indication that quality planning leads to quality outcomes. Through examining the historical

frameworks surrounding special education transition, the Kohler (1996) model best fits the purpose of this research, with the exception that assessment of postsecondary outcomes and utilization of feedback to improve the secondary transition process are missing. Therefore, the conceptual framework for this study consisted of an adaptation of Kohler's (1996) taxonomy along with the insertion of the assessment of outcomes and program improvements because it best integrates the transition models of Will (1984), Halpern (1985), and Bronfenbrenner (1998). In the diagram below the boxes with the solid lines are all a part of the original Kohler taxonomy and the two boxes with the broken lines represent the modifications I made to the Kohler (1996) model to include the assessment of outcomes and program improvement. The study proved supportive of the modified conceptual framework and the broken lines were replaced with solid lines in Figure 7 in Chapter 4, thereby adjusting the original Kohler (1996) model to now include following up with special education graduates and comparing postsecondary outcomes to secondary plans through assessing outcomes and utilizing postsecondary feedback and informing and improving postsecondary transition planning through program improvement.



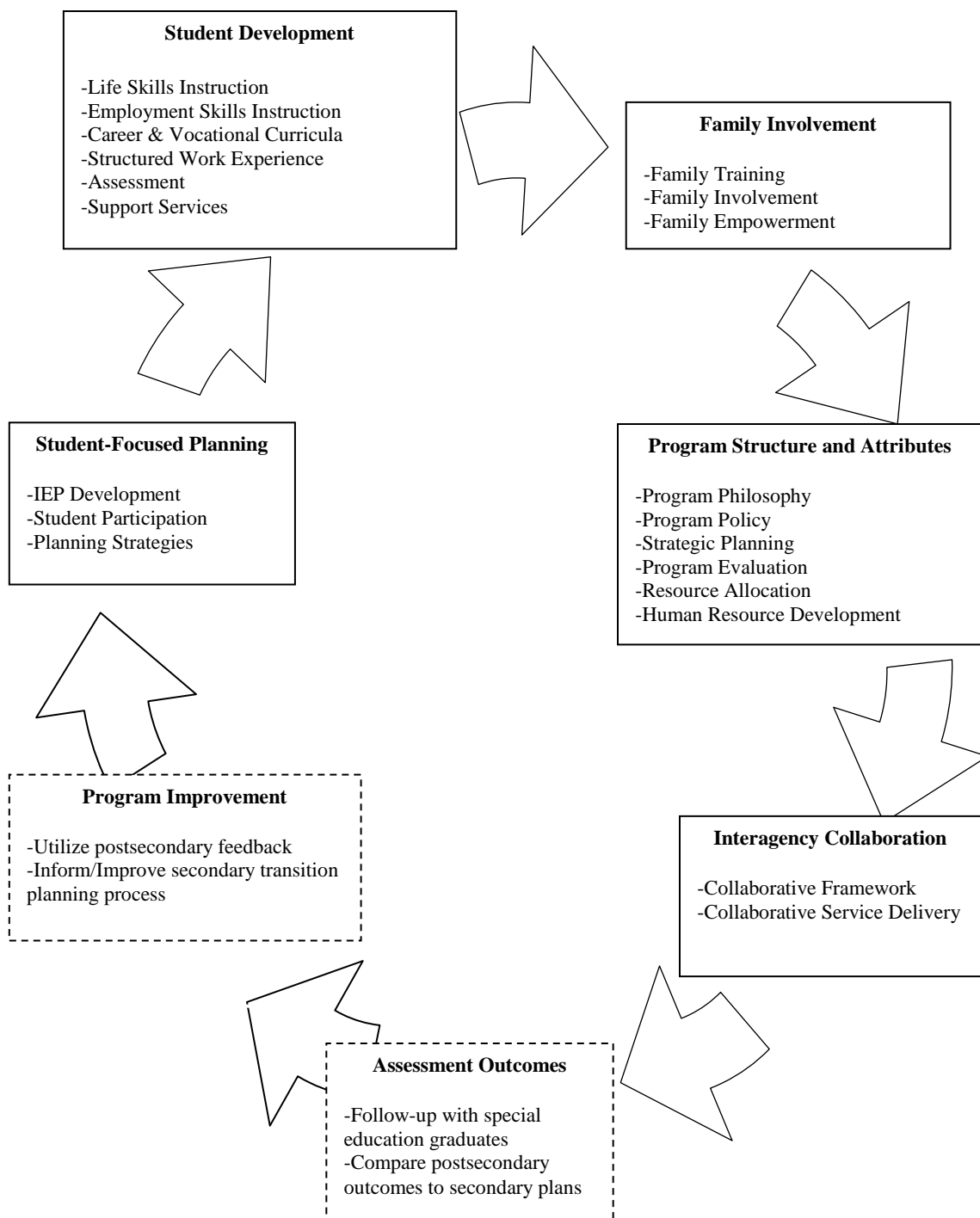


Figure 4. Research Conceptual Framework.

### Significance of Problem

The transition from the secondary level to the postsecondary level continues to be

an impediment for special education students due to the lack of consistency and lack of improvement in the secondary transition planning process. Although special education students have transition plans at the secondary level designed to help them accomplish their postsecondary goals, many of the students do not receive the preparation needed for success outlined by the transition plan (Greene & Kochhar-Bryant, 2003). Special education students may have a detailed transition plan that meets the requirements of Part B of the State Performance Plan, but many of the transition plans are not implemented with fidelity (Greene & Kochhar-Bryant, 2003). Special education students continue to lag behind their nondisabled peers in attaining employment and higher education after high school (Gregg, 2007; Webb et al., 2008). Therefore, more effective transition planning and thorough implementation is becoming increasingly important for special education students and their families.

The results of this study may assist high schools across the country in developing and implementing more effective transition plans and systematically following the transition process from the secondary level to the postsecondary level while linking the input of Indicator 13 to the output of Indicator 14. The effective development of the transition planning process may lead to an increased number of special education students obtaining postsecondary success and limit the challenges that they face, ultimately leading to benefits for the students, their families, and society.

In *Leandro v. State* (1997), the North Carolina Supreme Court clearly established the constitutional right to a sound basic education for all students that is supposed to prepare them for postsecondary success. However, if the secondary transition planning process is ineffective in preparing special education students for postsecondary success, then secondary educators are not fulfilling their obligation in providing a sound basic

education to all students under their *Leandro* rights. Research shows that effective secondary transition planning leads to more opportunities for successful postsecondary outcomes; therefore, secondary educators need to ensure that all students are graduating from high school with a sound basic education (Johnson, 2003; Madaus, Gerber, & Price, 2008; Mazzotti et al., 2009).

### **Limitations**

A limitation of the study is that I had no control over the parents' or guardians' decision making for their children. Therefore, some of the graduates' postsecondary outcomes may have been attributed to the influences and decisions of their parents more so than the implications of the secondary transition process including the quality of the transition plans and supporters. Another limitation involved how the school responded to the requirements of the IDEA (1990, 2004), such as whether the secondary transition process is properly adhered to within the confines of the law. The range of possible postsecondary settings in which successful outcomes can take place posed another limitation because there may have been more or fewer postsecondary opportunities available to the graduates due to the geographical location. Also, the fact that the graduates had a wide range of disabilities posed a limitation because students with higher intelligence quotients (IQ) may have had a better chance of meeting postsecondary goals than the students with lower IQ.

### **Delimitations**

A delimitation of the study was that it only focused on special education graduates. Also, I am employed by the school district in which the study took place and am familiar with some of the students, parents, administrators, and teachers which may have generated some bias. Bias was reduced by keeping the surveys and transition plans

anonymous through the use of proxies. According to Creswell (2012), wave analysis can be utilized to monitor response bias to surveys by grouping the returned surveys by intervals and monitoring them to see if the responses change from the first week of the study to the final week of the study. Another delimitation of the study was that the study was limited to one high school and one graduating class, which means that the results may not be generalized to other high schools. I followed the ethical guidelines of research practice in order to reduce bias.

### **Operational Definitions**

For the purpose of this study the following operational definitions were used.

**Effectiveness.** Producing the desired anticipation equaling success (Williams-Diehm & Lynch, 2007).

**Employment.** A special education graduate has obtained competitive employment at a permanent place of employment on his or her own or with the help of a job coach (Brooke, Revell, & Wehman, 2009).

**Postsecondary education.** A special education graduate is currently enrolled in a community college, technical school, or 4-year college/university and successfully completing such programs or graduated from a community college, technical school, or 4-year college/university with a certificate, diploma, or degree (Clark, 1996).

**Independent living.** A special education graduate is living away from home independently of parents or guardians with a roommate or alone in an apartment, house, rented room, college dormitory, or in a group home (Hartman, 2009).

**Indicator 13.** The secondary indicator in the IDEA (1990) that involves the input process of the transition plan designed to prepare students for postsecondary outcomes (Mazzotti et al., 2009).

**Indicator 14.** The postsecondary indicator in the IDEA (1990) that involves the output process of student outcomes after completing high school (Mazzotti et al., 2009).

**Individual education plan (IEP).** A plan that addresses the needs of the student and outlines the goals and objectives of special education services to be provided to the student in the form of measurable goals (Yell et al., 2006).

**Postsecondary mentors.** Outside agencies such as vocational rehabilitation agencies and mental health agencies that help provide services such as job coaching, mental health services, tuition assistance, and life-skills training for special education students during and after high school (Gil, 2007).

**Postsecondary success.** A special education graduate is either successfully employed, living independently, enrolled in a certificate, diploma, or degree program and/or a graduate of such a program dependent or independent of their transition plans (Johnson, 2003).

**Quality of life.** Halpern's definition of the postsecondary transition outcomes that special education students should experience to include a sense of personal fulfillment, physical and material well-being, and performance of a variety of adult roles in order to lead a successful life (Hosp et al., 2001).

**Self-determination.** A special education graduate demonstrates abilities to self-advocate and make decisions and choices for him/herself independently (Madaus et al., 2008).

**Special education graduates.** Young adults with emotional or behavioral disorders, learning disabilities, developmental disabilities, and chronic physical health conditions who successfully completed high school with a diploma or certificate (Curtis et al., 2009).

**Special education student.** Term used to refer to students who need special education services as a result of a documented disability so that they can receive a free and appropriate public education (Gil, 2007).

**Sound basic education.** All students are entitled to sufficient academic and vocational skills that enable them to successfully engage in postsecondary education and competitive employment (*Leandro v. State*, 1997).

**Transition.** “Movement, passage, or change from one position, state, stage, subject, concept, etc., to another; change: the transition from adolescence to adulthood” (Dragoo, 2006, p. 2).

**Transition activities.** A special education student engages in work and community experiences that prepare him or her to transition from secondary life to postsecondary life (Schmitz, 2008).

**Transition plan.** A plan designed to clearly define students’ postsecondary goals by addressing their strengths, needs, and interests in order to develop an appropriate curricular plan and community-based instruction necessary to meet the outlined postsecondary goals (Collet-Klingenberg & Kolb, 2011).

**Transition planning process.** The goals and objectives of the student’s needs are addressed and implemented to assist the student in successfully attaining desired postsecondary outcomes (Kellems & Morningstar, 2010).

**Transition services.** A coordinated set of activities designed to promote movement from school to post-school activities such as employment, postsecondary education, vocational training, independent living, community participation, and adult services (Yell et al., 2006).

## Summary

The transition process from high school to adulthood is challenging enough for most graduates but students with disabilities face even more challenges with the transition process (Robick, 2010). Many special education students face discrimination due to their disabilities when looking for jobs, and the current state of the economy does not ease matters for them. Although secondary transition plans are designed to support and prepare students for postsecondary challenges, few deliver the actual transition services such as curriculum and instruction, related services, community experiences, employment, and adult living to address students' needs (Yell et al., 2006). Collet-Klingenberg and Kolb (2011) indicated that merely writing a transition plan is not enough and that actual implementation such as exposing students to real-life experiences and delivering adequate curriculum and instruction is the best way to prepare students for successful postsecondary outcomes. This study involved an in-depth analysis on the connection of the input of Indicator 13 and the output of Indicator 14 to provide more insight into the need of following up on secondary transition plans to improve their effectiveness. This study also informed and ideally will improve how well school districts build connections between secondary transition plans and postsecondary outcomes.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

Although more special education graduates are enrolling in postsecondary institutions and securing employment than in the past, they still lag behind their nondisabled peers in postsecondary success (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, & Levine, 2005). Based on results from the 2004 Harris Survey, only 35% of people with disabilities held employment in comparison to 78% of people employed without disabilities (Brooke et al., 2009). The gap between special education students and their nondisabled peers continues to exist in the area of employment with 75% to 85% of special education graduates experiencing unemployment (McGlashing-Johnson, Agran, Sitlington, Cavin, & Wehmeyer, 2003).

According to Wilson (2004), society would benefit from more special education students participating in postsecondary education. Stodden (2005) pointed out that education is a key factor in special education students gaining successful employment and that employment allows for an enhanced quality of life for the students. Stodden also emphasized that special education students should have access to postsecondary education and meaningful employment the same as their nondisabled counterparts and that lack of preparation limits their opportunities and ultimately denies them the quality of life. Therefore, it is important that special education students receive quality secondary transition planning to prepare them for postsecondary success.

This literature review provided information surrounding special education transition planning and postsecondary outcomes research. The following areas were examined in this literature review to determine the links between the execution of secondary transition plans and the postsecondary outcomes of special education students



turned graduates: (1) legislation governing special education transition, (2) transition plans and services, (3) transition assessments, (4) transition activities, (5) curriculum and instruction, (6) postsecondary outcomes, (7) postsecondary education, (8) employment, (9) adult living, (10) community services, (11) special education teachers perceptions, (12) postsecondary mentors' roles, and (13) family perceptions.

### **Legislation Governing Special Education Transition**

Federal legislation has increased accessibility to postsecondary education for special education students (Stodden, 2005). In 1990, the IDEA replaced public law 94-142 (Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975) to focus more on student outcomes. The IDEA (1990) defined transition as:

A coordinated set of activities for a student, designed within an outcome-oriented process, which promotes movement from school to post-school activities, including post-secondary education, vocational training, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, and community participation. The coordinated set of activities shall take into account the student's preferences and interest, and shall include instruction, community experiences, the development of employment and other post-school adult living objectives, and when appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills and functional vocational evaluation. (p. 118)

In 1997, the IDEA (1990) was reauthorized to mandate that transition planning must begin by age 14, that parents would have a stronger role in the special education process, and that more emphasis would be placed on student progress (Yell et al., 2006). The IDEA (1990) was amended again in 2004 to align with No Child Left Behind in which all special education teachers are required to be highly qualified, special education

services are based on peer reviewed research, and all special education students are required to participate in statewide assessments. The IDEA (2004) also mandated that transition plans be a part of every student's IEP by the age of 16. The transition plan must include measurable postsecondary goals relating to transition services, training, education, employment, and independent living based on age-appropriate transition assessments (Yell et al., 2006). According to deFur (2003), the integration of transition services into the IEP allows for effective transition services and processes.

Although the reauthorization of the Education of All Handicapped Children Act in 1984 called for public school systems to incorporate appropriate transition services into the curriculum of special education students, regulation of the actual transition services was left up to individual school systems resulting in many special education students not receiving transition services (deFur, 2003). In 1994, a lawsuit was filed in the state of North Carolina by parents, students, and five low-income school districts in which the plaintiffs complained that the school districts did not have enough money to provide equal education and special services for the students (*Leandro v. State*, 1997). As a result of the significant case, *Leandro* rights were created for every student in North Carolina providing the equal opportunity to a sound basic education to include "sufficient academic and vocational skills to enable the student to successfully engage in post-secondary education or vocational training" (*Leandro v. State*, 1997, p. 13). Orientation to the reasoning behind special education transition is paramount to the transition process in public school systems, and in North Carolina all students have a right to a sound basic education that prepares them for postsecondary success (deFur, 2003, Finn & Kohler, 2009; *Leandro v. State*, 1997).

## **Transition Plans and Services**

Wassily Leontief developed the input-output economic model which represents the interdependencies of different economies showing how economies are dependent on each other both as customers of their outputs and suppliers of their inputs (Bhattarai, 2007). Similarly, both Indicators 13 and 14 are designed to be interdependent upon each other and both are expected to provide effective secondary transition plans for special education students to receive the necessary services to produce postsecondary success. Research by Savage (2005) showed that successful transition planning must involve the students, their families, and an effective transition team in order to achieve long-term ongoing success for special education students. Many transition plans written at the secondary level are merely pro forma and are written more for compliance rather than intention. According to Collet-Klingenberg and Kolb (2011), just writing down transition goals does not mean that actual implementation of the goals will take place. Under the IDEA (2004), transition plans should build upon a student's strengths, preferences, interests, and needs in order to maximize postsecondary success.

A transition plan should specify student goals for successful transition from secondary to postsecondary life. Unfortunately, sometimes it is just a document that leads to outcomes that students could have achieved without a written plan. A plan alone does not prepare students for the postsecondary challenges that they may face, such as few employment and educational opportunities and low self-determination (Gil, 2007). However, one's contribution to society is often examined by his or her ability to obtain employment and/or obtain a postsecondary education, but this is often a challenge for special education students (Gil, 2007). With more and more students being diagnosed with disabilities, successful postsecondary transition planning is a priority, and more data

is needed on how well secondary educators prepare special education students for postsecondary challenges so that they can lead more meaningful lives (Webb et al., 2008; Wright, 2006).

The National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 revealed that special education students are less likely to have checking accounts, credit cards, and long-term employment, and are less likely to enroll in postsecondary education programs after high school (Wagner et al., 2005). The results of this study highlight the need for the implementation of more effective transition plans (Kellems & Morningstar, 2010). Transition planning is important in allowing special education students and their families to prepare for life after high school (Mazzotti et al., 2009).

The primary purpose of transition planning is to clearly define the student's postsecondary goals by addressing and defining student strengths, needs, and desires in order to develop an appropriate curricular plan, including academic and functional coursework and community-based instruction necessary to meet postsecondary goals. (Mazzotti et al., 2009, p. 45)

According to Dragoo (2006), the National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities (NICHCY) indicated that transition is a change from adolescence to adulthood that requires the areas of postsecondary education, vocational training, employment, independent living, and community participation to be considered in planning for students' transitions from high school to adulthood under the IDEA (2004). Federal laws for special education students such as IDEA (2004) have been revised many times since the original passage of the Education of All Children Handicapped Act in 1975, but the most significant revision in regards to the transition process occurred in 1990 with the new provisions to provide special education students with transition

services (Hosp et al., 2001).

Along with the IDEA (2004) revision, the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) required that all states submit data on 20 indicators for special education students to ensure that states were meeting the guidelines. The secondary transition indicator is known as Indicator 13 and the postsecondary indicator is known as Indicator 14. Indicator 13 requires that all IEPs written for students 16 years old and older include appropriate measurable postsecondary goals based on age-appropriate transition assessments and transition services that prepare students to meet postsecondary goals (Mazzotti et al., 2009). Indicator 14 is sometimes referred to as the postsecondary outcome indicator because it is the part of the IDEA (2004) that requires states to collect post-school data on students. Under Part B State Performance Plan and Annual Performance Report in the IDEA (2004), Indicator 14 requires states to collect and report on the following:

Percent of youth who are no longer in secondary school, had IEPs in effect at the time they left school, and were: (a) enrolled in higher education within one year of leaving high school; (b) enrolled in higher education or competitively employed within one year of leaving high school; or (c) enrolled in higher education, or in some other postsecondary education or training program; or competitively employed or in some other employment within one year of leaving high school. (p. 118)

The provisions under the IDEA (1990) call for transition services to consist of assessments, parent participation, and student participation (Clark, 1996). Under federal law, transition services include the following: coordinating activities for special education students to promote movement from secondary education to postsecondary

education, assessing the needs of special education students and providing services to address those needs, curriculum and instruction, related services, community experiences, employment, and adult living (Yell et al., 2006).

### **Transition Assessments**

Transition planning should involve realistic goals for students that are generated from data collected through student interviews, general observations, community-based work experience evaluations, and student profile sheets which are all considered a form of transition assessments. “Transition assessment is defined as the ongoing process of collecting data on the individual’s strengths, needs, preferences, and interests as they relate to the demands of current and future working, educational, living, personal, and social environments” (Kellems & Morningstar, 2010, p. 63). Transition assessment data create the foundation for goals and services in the IEP and often lead to successful transition outcomes (Lindstrom et al., 2007). The transition data should have direct implications for instructional program decisions, curriculum planning, and additional assessment requirements (Clark, 1996). Transition assessments, such as career exploration assessments, have been proven to help students explore career options as well as identify their interests, abilities, possible needs for accommodations, and a variety of career options (Herbert, Lorenz, & Trusty, 2010; Lindstrom et al., 2007). Some other suggested transition assessments include interviews, direct observations, adaptive behavior scales, aptitude tests, and curriculum-based assessments that are valid and reliable in determining a student’s preferences, interests, needs, and strengths. Educators must be careful in choosing transition assessments to make sure that they are not biased and are indeed valid and reliable (Clark, 1996). Assessments that are designed for a particular special education population, such as hearing impaired or autism, may not be

appropriate to use for a student with a different disability. Cultural bias is another concern that educators should be aware of when administering transition assessments and educators should make sure that the assessments meet the challenges of multicultural populations. Therefore, no transition assessment should be routinely administered to all special education students without making sure that it is individually appropriate and unbiased (Clark, 1996).

A recent study on transition assessment performed by Carter, Trainor, Sun, and Owens (2009) concluded that transition planning needs to focus more on instruction in the area of training, education, employment, and independent living in order to prepare students for successful postsecondary outcomes. According to the IDEA (1990), a sound transition plan must include measurable goals such as postsecondary education, employment, community participation, and independent living to prepare students for the change from the secondary level to the postsecondary level which are all the foundation for postsecondary success. The IDEA (1990) outlined the following criteria for quality transition plans:

1. Transition services are based on age appropriate and measurable postsecondary goals and a coordinated set of activities.
2. Students are included in the transition planning.
3. Students' individual needs and interests are taken into consideration when preparing the plan.
4. The planning process involves interagency collaboration.
5. The transition services include courses of study that reasonably enable the students to meet their postsecondary goals.

Johnson (2003) described the fundamental criteria for transition planning as (1)

using curriculum and instruction goals to promote student achievement, (2) assuring that students graduate from high school, (3) setting clear postsecondary goals, (4) identifying services necessary to assure that students successfully achieve their postsecondary goals, (5) helping students locate needed outside agency services, and (6) evaluating and monitoring student progress toward goals. Research suggests that transition plans should be well-defined in helping students to achieve postsecondary goals and involve collaboration from teachers, parents, students, and outside agency representatives (Collet-Klingenberg & Kolb, 2011; Kellums & Morningstar, 2010; Sabbatino & Macrine, 2007). The NSTTAC (2008) set the criteria for quality transition plans in the form of a widely used *Indicator 13 Checklist* that consists of criteria such as (1) appropriate measurable postsecondary goals that are updated annually and based on transition assessments, (2) transition services that reasonably enable students to meet their postsecondary goals, (3) a curriculum that reasonably enables students to meet their postsecondary goals, (4) goals that relate to the students transition services needs, (5) the student is invited to participate in the IEP transition meeting, and (6) agency representatives are invited to participate in the IEP transition meeting with parental consent if the student has not reached age of majority. For the purpose of this study a combination of the IDEA (2004) requirements, NSTTAC Indicator 13 criteria, and Johnson's fundamentals for transition plans were used to set the criteria in determining the quality of the transition plans that were used in this study. The external set of criteria that was used to critique the quality of the transition plans consisted of (1) the plan includes age appropriate and measurable postsecondary goals, (2) the plan includes curriculum and instruction services that prepare the student to achieve their postsecondary goals such as higher education, independent living, competitive employment, self-determination, and community experiences, (3) the plan



includes student participation and addresses the strengths, needs, interests, and preferences of the students, (4) the plan includes outside agencies such as vocational rehabilitation agencies, mental health agencies, and other servicing agencies along with teacher and parent input and collaboration, and (5) the plan identifies services that the student will need from outside agencies to achieve their postsecondary goals.

Transition assessments should be comprehensive and address a wide array of domains pertaining to post-school outcomes such as the domains outlined in Halpern's quality of life (Carter et al., 2009). According to Morningstar and Liss (2008), "the lack of good transition assessments may lead to unclear or conflicting transition outcomes, services, and goals" for students (p. 53). Transition assessments should be ongoing and relate to the demands of current and future employment, education, adult living, and social environments (Mazzotti et al., 2009). Transition assessments mark the beginning of transition planning and should be used to help determine the present level of performance of special education students leading to the development of postsecondary goals, transition services, and annual IEP goals.

### **Transition Activities**

Transition activities are defined as a set of services designed to assist students transitioning from school to adult life (Schmitz, 2008). Transition activities must be coordinated to produce results and involve teaching students how to set goals, develop action plans, self-reflect, and advocate for one's self (Angell, Stoner, & Fulk, 2010). Transition activities should consist of opportunities for students to learn about school and community resources, investigate a variety of career options, and learn about their disability and accommodation needs. In facilitating transition activities, teachers should meet with students to discuss their interests and develop possible career goals, allow

students to explore the full extent of their abilities, and provide students with multiple opportunities to explore postsecondary options (Lindstrom et al., 2007). Research suggests that learning is connected to experience, and students actually learn more when they can distinguish clear connections between instruction and the real world (O'Connor, 2009).

Examples of transition activities include, but are not limited to, transition fairs. Transition fairs involve inviting potential employers, postsecondary institutions, and community agencies to inform students and parents about postsecondary options. In planning a transition fair, the grade level of the students and the students' disability levels should be taken into account as well as the proper employers and agency representatives to invite to the fair in order to best meet the students' needs (Baugher & Nichols, 2008). Another example of transition activities include service-learning projects in which the students prepare, plan, execute, and reflect on the service-learning project that they designed and participated in. Service-learning projects are defined as enhancements to the general curriculum that provide students with opportunities to relate knowledge to the real world. Teachers are encouraged to use transition activities such as service-learning projects because they promote relationship-building skills and allow students the opportunity to grow their interpersonal skills and knowledge (O'Connor, 2009).

Carter et al. (2009) recommended community conversations as a transition activity in which students have the opportunity to meet members of the community during a question and answer forum so that they can establish a network of possible job contacts and community supporters. Other real world transition activities such as transition nights allow students the opportunity to meet with college representatives to find out about the services offered to special education students on the college level (Gil,

2007). Transition activities such as student portfolios that involve the students in organizing information such as interest inventory assessments, resumes, and community experience data that can be used to highlight the students are a good way to help students communicate their skills to job contacts (Gil, 2007). Although the research indicates that the recommended transition activities are beneficial to the transition process in preparing students for postsecondary success, there are few research-based connections between the recommended activities and their impact on postsecondary success.

### **Curriculum and Instruction**

The curriculum and instruction portion of the transition services encompasses education goals such as completion of a high school diploma or certificate, college or technical school plans, compensatory educational program plans, and short-term education or employment training programs (Mazzotti et al., 2009). Collaboration among teachers, parents, administrators, and students is the key to successful curriculum and instruction delivery of transition planning (Clark, 1996; Kellums & Morningstar, 2010). According to Kellems and Morningstar (2010), the curriculum and instruction design for special education students should help develop the skills and knowledge that students need to accomplish transition goals. Instruction should focus on the needs, academic levels, and interests of the individual students and align with the future goals of the students and should be indicated in the transition plan (Clark & Unruh, 2010). Various types of instructional techniques such as life skills instruction, community-based instruction, and finance instruction are beneficial in aiding students in the transition process and preparing them for life after high school.

Not only should teachers use various types of instructional strategies, but they should individualize transition instruction and offer students multiple opportunities to

experience failure and success as they begin the transition process. It is also important for teachers to provide instruction in self-determination skills so that students can build the self-knowledge and self-awareness skills needed to facilitate a more effective transition process for themselves (Lindstrom et al., 2007; Martin et al., 2006).

### **Postsecondary Outcomes**

Under the IDEA (1990), postsecondary outcomes are identified as postsecondary education, vocational training, employment, independent living, and community participation. The achievement of successful postsecondary outcomes for special education students is often a challenge because many students are not prepared for the challenges of adult life during the secondary transition planning process (Williams-Diehm & Lynch, 2007). Successful transition planning involves preparing students for real-life situations that they may encounter after high school through transition activities such as community-based experiences, work experiences, and vocational training to name a few (Collet-Klingenberg & Kolb, 2011; Oertle & Trach, 2007). Research shows that it is best practice to promote active student involvement in transition planning, and students who are involved in transition planning are more likely to meet their transition goals (King, Baldwin, Currie, & Evans, 2006; Lindstrom et al., 2007; Wehmeyer, Palmer, Soukup, Garner, & Lawrence, 2007). When students are involved in the transition planning process, they become more aware of the postsecondary challenges that they may face and learn the necessary skills to prepare for them (Arndt, Konrad, & Test, 2006). Students who are involved in their transition plan tend to have stronger self-determination skills and achieve better postsecondary outcomes than students with lower self-determination skills (Arndt et al., 2006; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Williams-Diehm & Lynch, 2007). It is vital that special education students leave high school armed with the

skills to achieve postsecondary success.

**Postsecondary education.** Research shows that the number of special education students who enroll in college lags behind the number of their nondisabled peers who enroll, and many of the special education students who do enroll in college do not graduate (Clark, 1996; Gregg, 2007; Webb et al., 2008). Studies reveal that many students with learning disabilities do not consider higher education as an option because they do not feel prepared or encouraged to pursue higher education opportunities (Clark, 1996). According to Gregg (2007), lack of proper transition planning from secondary schooling to postsecondary schooling leads to a low enrollment and low retention rates of special education students. However, access to higher education with disability support programs has increased over the years for special education students (Webb et al., 2008).

Although the number of special education students choosing to attend institutions of higher education has grown over the years, there is still a gap between the number of their nondisabled peers who enroll because many special education students do not receive the needed support at the secondary level to prepare them for the transition to college as their nondisabled peers do. Studies reveal that many special education students do not consider themselves bright enough for college and choose other options, often due to the advice of their teachers (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). Unfortunately, many of the special education students entering college are not aware of the disability services available to them in college because they lack the self-determination skills to advocate for themselves (Gil, 2007). Self-determination skills should be taught through direct instruction and students should be allowed to practice the skills through community experiences at the secondary level so they will be well prepared at the postsecondary level (Gil, 2007). A National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 revealed that many special

education students do not receive accommodations in college because they do not know who to inform about the accommodations or they are ashamed of disclosing their disability (Gil, 2007). Therefore, it is imperative to inform students of their rights under the Americans with Disabilities Act and to prepare students to advocate for themselves during the transition process so that they will be ready to meet the challenges of postsecondary institutions (Gil, 2007). It is also important to invite someone from the college level who works in disability services to IEP transition meetings so that students and parents will have the opportunity to ask questions and learn more about how disability services work on the college level (Gil, 2007). With the rise in special education students enrolling in postsecondary institutions, it is essential for secondary and postsecondary educators to collaborate in implementing effective transition plans.

However, many secondary educators do not consider higher education as an option for many special education students, and often encourage students to enroll in vocational programs (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). Secondary teachers are responsible for facilitating transition activities in the classroom that prepare special education students for any postsecondary option they choose, whether it be higher education or the work force (Webb et al., 2008). Allowing students the opportunity to explore their future aspirations in terms of learning, networking, adult living, and employment can provide students with perspectives on college and other postsecondary options. Wright (2006) suggested that students who are denied such opportunities at the secondary level tend to not advocate for themselves at the postsecondary level. Interestingly, many students report feeling unprepared for the rigors of higher education but feel that their secondary teachers prepared them adequately for higher education. The same study revealed that students who felt this way were often the ones who did not take advantage of disability

services offered at the college level (Reed et al., 2009).

Special education students often are very dependent on the assistance of their parents and teachers in secondary school, which often leads to struggles in college (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). The students are ill-prepared for college because their secondary transition planning process often neglects preparing them to take responsibility for their postsecondary education. Researchers suggest that more communication needs to take place between secondary and postsecondary educators on how to best transition special education students from the overly dependent secondary environment to the independent, challenging college environment (Garrison-Wade & Lehmann, 2009; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). Students need to establish strong self-advocacy skills early on in the transition process so they can successfully navigate college and become the primary agents for implementing their college success (Garrison-Wade & Lehmann, 2009).

**Employment.** When it comes to transition services, employment is defined as working in a competitive labor market as a full-time or part-time worker in an integrated setting at or above minimum wage compensation (NSTTAC, 2008). Supported employment and sheltered employment are two forms of employment recognized under transition services. Supported employment involves customized competitive work in an integrated setting in which special education graduates work with a job coach. Sheltered employment is defined as an accredited facility that offers work activity centers for special education graduates with special provisions under the federal minimum wage law (Mazzotti et al., 2009). Supported employment costs less than sheltered employment because it results in a greater number of special education students contributing to the economy (Carter et al., 2009). According to Brooke et al. (2009), special education students need access to quality competitive employment services, and such services

should be measured by seven indicators that include the quality of competitive jobs, employment in integrated job settings, quality jobsite support, career development, individualization of job goals, job status consistent with coworkers, and the benefits of planning. However, just simply creating a transition plan does not always lead to long-term employment.

Studies reveal that schools that developed transition programs to help special education students graduate from high school with jobs ended up with the students unemployed in a short timespan (Sabbatino & Macrine, 2007). Some researchers blame this on the lack of opportunities for students to make informed choices about their career goals during the transition planning process (Brooke et al., 2009). The transition process should involve utilizing a variety of strategies to ensure that students choose job goals that are individualized to their preferences and abilities. According to Brooke et al., (2009), the job satisfaction level of special education students also plays an important role in how well they integrate and participate in the community. Therefore, well-coordinated transition plans that include job retention systems such as individualized supports, accommodations, monitoring, and registering students with vocational rehabilitation agencies are needed to help students with ongoing job satisfaction or job replacement assistance in the case of job loss (Brooke et al.). Information taken from the studies called for increased school accountability when it comes to transition planning, such as having employers and job coaches evaluate students' work experiences while in school. Nationwide studies on high school transition programs note that employers and job coaches find it important to match jobs with the students, encourage family support, market the students, strengthen the students' social behavior, and strengthen the students' job skills to help them achieve longevity on the job (Sabbatino & Macrine, 2007).



Heuman pointed out that “students who are involved in meaningful school-to-work programs and have the opportunity to work while in high school are more likely to be employed after graduation” (Sabbatino & Macrine, 2007, p. 36).

Other studies point out the importance of schools collaborating with local businesses to create internship programs for special education students (Wehman, Brooke, Green, Hewett, & Tipton, 2008). Special education graduates are often unemployed or underemployed and have the lowest rate of engagement in job-related activities, which is why internships for special education students are important during their high school years (Hartman, 2009). A study performed on special education students who participated in a community-based internship program revealed that all of the students who exited the program continued to maintain successful employment (Hartman, 2009). “Employers report that while hiring people with disabilities makes good business sense, they often do not know how to tap into this labor force” (Wehman et al., 2008, p. 63). However, through building relationships between schools and businesses, the number of competitive job opportunities for special education students will increase. Morgan and Openshaw (2011) suggested increasing job opportunities for special education students through face-to-face social networking because it leads to employment that offers more support, makes the students more responsible, and builds up their support system which leads to better matched jobs for them.

**Adult living.** The area of transition services in regards to adult living is also known as independent living. It consists of needed skills such as money management, community experiences, self-determination, and home maintenance to enhance the ability for special education students to live independently. Researchers such as Cronin define independent living as “those skills or tasks that contribute to the successful independent

functioning of an individual into adulthood” (Mazzotti et al., 2009, p. 49). Other researchers point out the importance of being able to address postsecondary adult living goals in a natural environment in order to generalize necessary skills (Hartman, 2009). The ultimate goal of detailed transition plans and services is for special education students to lead independent, productive, and fulfilling adult lives (Mazzotti et al., 2009; Sabbatino & Macrine, 2007).

**Community experiences.** The community offers a wealth of opportunities, supports, and ideas that, if utilized, can be used to broaden the work experiences of special education students (Carter et al., 2009). Community experiences provide students with the opportunities to meet IEP goals and to grow personally and socially while engaging in real-life situations (O’Connor, 2009). Studies also show that community experiences create strong, independent, self-determined, and productive citizens (Hartman, 2009). Community-based education such as learning to access public transportation and making purchases are essential for special education students (Sabbatino & Macrine, 2007). A study on an urban transition program entitled *Start on Success* that consists of a community partnership with a university and hospital, revealed that the students involved in the program demonstrated increased self-esteem, increased work ethic, and increased knowledge of community-based economics. The study also revealed that the university and hospital that were involved with the *Start on Success* program benefitted from the program as well through an increased awareness of student needs and a deeper appreciation for special education students (Sabbatino & Macrine, 2007).

Students learn the requirements of the real world through community-based programs that explore career avenues. Job shadowing programs in areas that interest

students are beneficial in helping students make decisions about their future (Kellems & Morningstar, 2010). Community work experiences also allow students the opportunity to build work skills and work habits. Studies reveal that students who participate in community-based work experiences are more likely to graduate from high school and find a job (Lindstrom et al., 2007). Community experiences encourage students to think critically about their future occupations and the relevance of education for their future as well as give them a realistic view of the work world (O'Connor, 2009).

### **Special Education Teacher Perceptions**

Special education teachers play a vital role in creating and following through with transition plans. The attitudes and perceptions of teachers about students' capabilities have a major impact on the successes and failures of postsecondary transition (Gregg, 2007). Research shows that secondary teachers feel that they are not well prepared to plan and deliver transition services (Angell et al., 2010; Shogren et al., 2007). Some teachers feel that they do not receive appropriate staff development regarding transition services and are not armed with enough information about community services and programs for special education students (Benitez, Morningstar, & Frey, 2009). In another study, teachers and counselors indicated that they do not receive adequate training in dealing with transition issues and in collaborating with parents and the community. Results of the same study also suggest that high school staff do not understand their roles and duties when it comes to transition planning (Herbert et al., 2010). In a study on transition involvement, many teachers indicated that they learn about the transition process as they are going through the process and feel that they need more adequate training in the area (Li, Bassett, & Hutchinson, 2009). "Teachers who do not understand transition planning are less effective in ensuring that the students receive the maximum

benefits resulting from the transition plan” (Williams-Diehm & Lynch, 2007, p. 20).

Although some studies show the need for more teacher training in the transition planning process, the training must also address the attitudes and beliefs of the teachers towards special education students and transition services (Herbert et al., 2010; Li et al., 2009).

Teachers should be careful not to limit special education students or make assumptions about what they can and cannot do. Studies reveal that high school teachers and counselors believe that students find exposure to career services during the transition process helpful (Herbert et al., 2010; Lindstrom et al., 2007). The study also revealed that the high school staff perceived parents as being unrealistic about the postsecondary possibilities of their children (Herbert et al., 2010). One of the participants in the study commented that “Most students today have a post-secondary outcome expectation but have third grade reading and math levels” (Herbert et al., 2010, p. 23). It is important for educators to listen carefully to students’ hopes, interests, and dreams without establishing preconceived notions or making judgments about what is realistic when it comes to the students (Lindstrom et al., 2007). Teachers should be flexible and allow students to learn gradually and not expect them to follow a predictable sequence or scope. Research suggests that teachers must ensure that IEP teams identify and collaborate with responsible agencies, promote the value of preparing for and participating in postsecondary outcomes, and identify the specific accommodations and supports that students will need after high school (Gil, 2007; Oertle & Trach, 2007; Test, Fowler, White, Richter, & Walker, 2009). Teachers should provide students with opportunities to practice self-determination skills through making their own decisions and expressing preferences so the teachers will have a better understanding of the students’ capabilities and needs. Teachers often associate student learning with the characteristics of the

students and the students' disability labels, which leads to misconceptions regarding possible postsecondary outcomes for the students (Thoma, Pannozzo, Fritton, & Bartholomew, 2008). Until teachers begin to view the transition process as a way of teaching instead of just merely meeting the requirements of the law, the postsecondary outcomes of special education students will continue to be limited (Webb et al., 2008).

### **Postsecondary Mentors' Roles**

Research reveals that it is important for educators to collaborate with outside agencies such as vocational rehabilitation agencies to help provide services such as job coaching, mental health services, tuition assistance, and life skills training for special education students during and after high school (Gil, 2007; Oertle & Trach, 2007; Test et al., 2009). Interagency collaboration is defined as the process of establishing relationships with outside agencies that include paying for or providing related services to special education students after high school (Kellems & Morningstar, 2010).

Establishing a relationship with outside agencies early on during the secondary transition planning process allows special education students the opportunity to have access to postsecondary mentors. According to Oertle and Trach (2007), the assistance of rehabilitation professionals is critical in providing support to students with disabilities because many of the students are not considered as skillful contributors to society. Therefore, rehabilitation professionals are instrumental in helping special education students gain access to community and workplace resources and need to be a part of the secondary transition planning process, but many are not invited to participate (Oertle & Trach). Research shows that in order for students to receive the maximum benefits from rehabilitation agencies, they need to understand who the rehabilitation providers are and what the services are (Neubert et al., 2002; Oertle & Trach; Williams-Diehm & Lynch,

2007). Studies also show that students who receive vocational rehabilitation services have a better chance at securing employment after high school (Neubert et al., 2002; Oertle & Trach). Although schools typically make student referrals to rehabilitation agencies during high school, they often fail to invite the agency representatives to the transition meetings, resulting in the students not receiving services until after graduation, if at all. This lack of participation in the transition meeting leads to rehabilitation agency representatives not really knowing how to assist students in achieving their postsecondary goals (Oertle & Trach). Once teachers better inform rehabilitation agencies of the agencies' roles in transition, rehabilitation agencies will better understand the importance of their participation in high school transition meetings to help students reach their postsecondary outcomes. Many students who wait until after graduation to register for rehabilitation services are faced with greater obstacles in achieving their postsecondary outcomes (Oertle & Trach). Transition is a collaborative process that involves the assistance of public agencies such as vocational rehabilitation agencies, and educators should ensure that students and their families are aware of the vocational rehabilitation services available to them (Lindstrom et al., 2007).

### **Family Perceptions**

According to Lindstrom et al. (2007), parents play a very important role in facilitating the transition process. It is important for parents to support special education students and provide them with opportunities for career exploration (Lindstrom et al.). The involvement of family is viewed as an important role in transition planning, and students report that it is important to them to have their family involved in the transition planning process (King et al., 2006). Parents do not always share the same vision as the student or the school when it comes to the transition plan, but their input and participation

in transition meetings are vital (Clark, 1996). Parents often play a more vital role in transition planning than schools give them credit for because they tend to place more emphasis on community experiences for their children instead of school-based approaches. Studies show that although parents may not know a lot about the transition process, they do have a lot of insight about their children that can be useful during the transition planning process (Ankeny, Wilkins, & Spain, 2009). Mothers who took part in a qualitative transition planning study indicated that they felt that the teachers promoted their own beliefs and dismissed the mothers' knowledge and input about their children during the secondary transition planning process (Ankeny et al., 2009). As a result, the mothers reported that they often left transition IEP meetings feeling confused and isolated (Ankeny et al., 2009). Due to the fact that parents typically know their children best, educators should welcome parent input and make sure that parents fully understand the transition process (Ankeny et al., 2009). The transition of special education students into adulthood is one of the major challenges for parents (Korpi, 2007). Parents are typically the ones responsible for obtaining and following through with the postsecondary services needed for their special education children (Ankeny et al., 2009).

However, sometimes with ingenious transition plans, some parents feel lost in finding resources for helping their children become independent productive citizens. Schools need to recognize that parents need assistance with transition planning and provide parents with the support that they need (Sabbatino & Macrine, 2007). Parents often need support in adapting to the idea that their child is transitioning into adulthood, and many do not know where to find such support. Parents often report feeling like they are alone in transitioning their children into adulthood and emphasize the need for support from others. Parents indicate that teachers need to repeatedly share information

with them about the transition process because people do not really retain information that they do not expect to use (Ankeny et al., 2009). Most parents report wanting their children to grow up to be independent, happy, and successful; therefore, they have a hard time accepting the fact that their children may need extra assistance in adult life and do not fully take in what the special education teachers tell them in IEP meetings. Parents also report that although schools consider the transition process complete when students graduate and secure employment, they want more for their children (Ankeny et al., 2009). Many parents indicate that they are interested in transition goals centered around education, relationships, independence, and family just as much as employment but that teachers tend to focus more on mediocre jobs for their children (Hogansen et al., 2008).

Some parents express the need for consistent communication from teachers regarding the transition process and for respect of their vision for their children's future. However, some teachers feel that parents have unrealistic goals for their children and that their job is to shape the unrealistic expectations (Hogansen et al., 2008). Teachers should look beyond the current status of the children and provide them with opportunities to experience real-life situations and to grow (Ankeny et al., 2009).

Parents who participated in a focus group about transition planning indicated that nothing seemed to happen for their children unless they were willing to push and advocate for what they wanted. The parents pointed out that appropriate transition planning does not occur in a timely manner and that their children are not fully prepared for postsecondary life (Curtis et al., 2009). Strong support groups are critical for families when advocating for their special education students and strong family support and advocacy leads to more successful postsecondary outcomes (King et al., 2006). Studies indicate that families are one of the consistent sources of support for special education



students after graduation, and they need to be made aware of the appropriate programs for their children (Ankeny et al., 2009; Shogren et al., 2007).

### **Summary**

Research shows that transition planning for special education students is an ongoing process that requires the collaboration of students, families, and teachers to ensure a successful adult life for students after graduation (Clark, 1996; Clark & Unruh, 2010; Gil, 2007; Kellems & Morningstar, 2010). Successful transition planning “must be conceptualized as a longitudinal process in which the plan changes and is revised as the needs of the youth and family change” (Clark & Unruh, 2010, p. 45). However, parents and teachers often blame each other for the lack of success in transition outcomes.

Parents feel that teachers do not do enough during the transition process to help prepare students for postsecondary challenges. Teachers feel that the parents need to be more responsible in preparing their children for the transition from the secondary level to the postsecondary level (Hogansen et al., 2008). Parents, students, postsecondary mentors or community agents, and educators all need to collaborate in order to best help students achieve their transition goals (Ankeny et al., 2009; Collet-Klingenberg & Kolb, 2011).

The literature supports the concept that special education students experience many challenges in obtaining successful postsecondary outcomes. Some research reveals that although transition goals are written down, the actual implementation of the goals rarely takes place (Collet-Klingenberg & Kolb, 2011). Price, Gerber, and Mulligan (2003) summed it up best with the question, “Do school-age transition programs . . . have a legitimate curriculum, or are they delivering instruction based on professional hunches rather than the realities of the workplace?” (p. 357). However, there are still gaps in the literature in determining the impact that students’ secondary transition plans have on

postsecondary outcomes when properly executed.

### **Chapter 3: Research Methodology**

#### **Introduction**

Little research exists in comparing the implementation of the secondary transition plan to the postsecondary outcomes of special education students regarding the preparation of special education students in obtaining postsecondary success. The rationale for conducting this mixed-methods study was to increase understanding of the link between the quality and effectiveness of secondary transition plans and the secondary transition planning process in regards to the postsecondary outcomes of special education students as well as how postsecondary feedback is used to improve secondary transition planning. In this study, the mixed-methods research offered equal priority to both the qualitative and quantitative data.

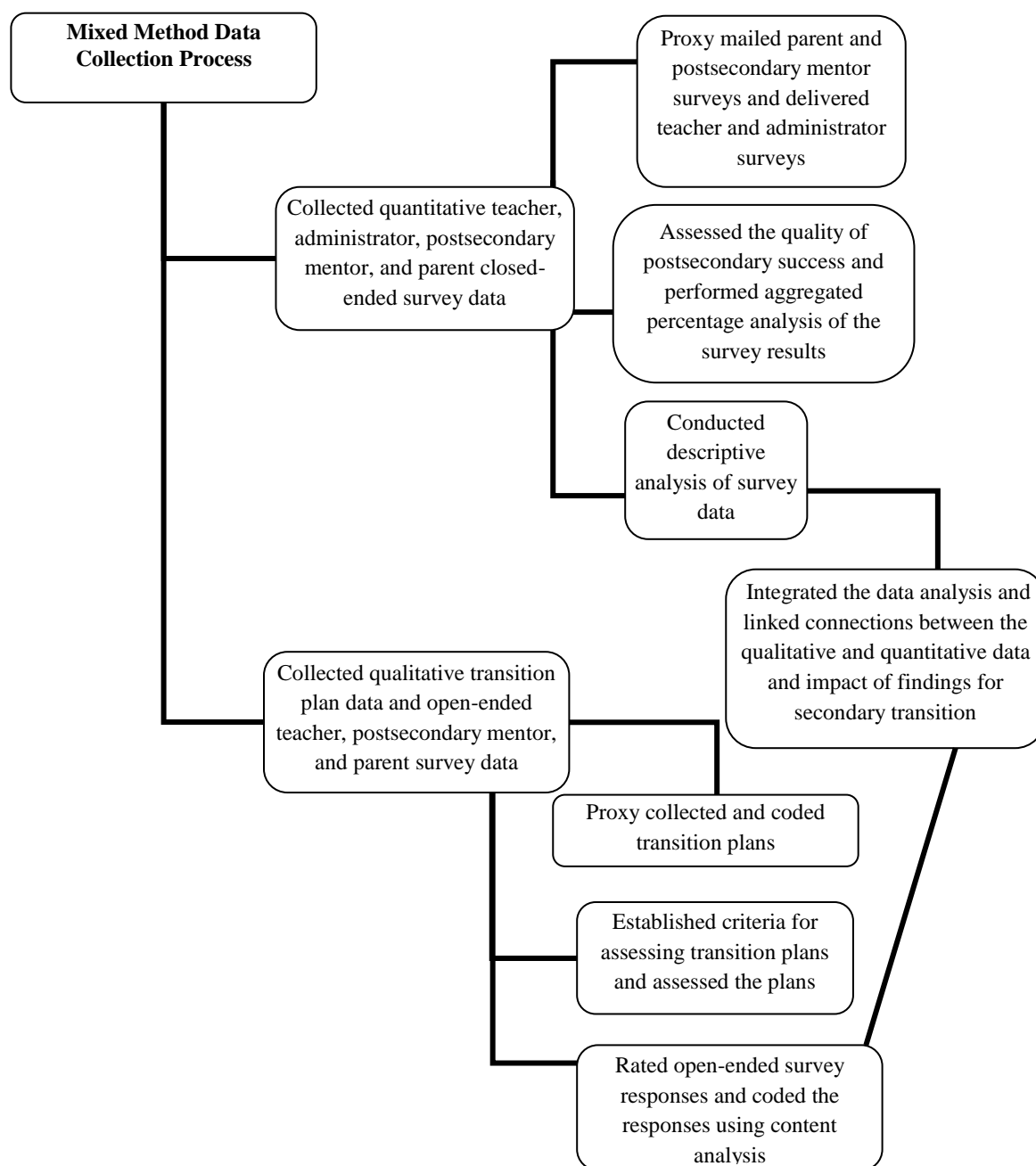


Figure 5. Study Methodology.

### Research Questions

The research questions that guided this study were:

1. How does the quality of the secondary transition plan meet the proposed criteria for a sound plan?
2. How did the implementation of the curriculum design aligned with the transition plan help prepare special education students while they were in high school for meeting postsecondary challenges?
3. What are the perceived influences that parents, administrators, teachers, and postsecondary mentors provided in the transitional planning process and their outcomes?
4. What postsecondary successes occurred outside the scope of the secondary transition plan and what factors contributed to those successes?

This mixed-methods study sought to find information for the research questions through examining the secondary transition plans of the graduates and through surveys administered to parents, teachers, administrators, and postsecondary mentors. All of the needed information such as contacts and the transition plans were found at the graduates' former high school. I obtained the transition plans and survey information through the use of a proxy in the fall and reported on the results in the spring. I analyzed the collected information through the use of aggregated percentages and content analysis to record the results, which I expected to lead to finding out that many of the graduates would not have met the postsecondary goals outlined within their secondary transition plans.

The qualitative research method was originally examined for this study because the study sought to assess the quality of the secondary transition plans of a group of 40 special education graduates from the class of 2011 in effectively preparing the graduates for postsecondary success, thus helping in determining the link between Indicator 13 and Indicator 14. However, a combination of both qualitative and quantitative research

methods were needed to perform the study because combining both methods to form a mixed-methods design best addressed the research questions. Qualitative data from the transition plans were used to help determine the alignment of the students' curriculum and instruction with their transition plan during high school. The quantitative data of the parent, teacher, and postsecondary mentor surveys were used to determine the connection between the intended content of Indicator 13 and the actual content of Indicator 14 as well as the short-term or long-term effects of the link between Indicators 13 and 14. The quantitative surveys were also used to determine whether or not there was a systematic practice for using postsecondary follow-up data to adjust and improve the use of transition plans in the secondary setting. The mixed-methods design allowed for utilizing a triangulation of data through qualitative inquiries in which I validated findings from a variety of sources. Creswell (2012) defined triangulation as collecting different types of data, data from different individuals, or utilizing different methods to collect data and taking the information from each source to support a theme.

### **Information Needed**

The information needed to gather answers to the proposed research questions laid within the secondary transition plans of the graduates along with a purposeful sample of participants who met the specific parameters needed to understand the central phenomenon of the study regarding the input of the secondary transition planning process and the output of the postsecondary outcomes. According to Creswell (2012), purposeful sampling is intentionally choosing individuals or sites or both to help develop a more detailed understanding of a phenomenon. Therefore, the homogenous sample of the parents/guardians of the special education graduates, the high school special education teachers responsible for writing and implementing the transition plans of the special

education graduates, the former school administrators of the graduates, and the postsecondary mentors of special education graduates provided the specific details and information needed to answer the research questions due to the experiences and connections with the transition process.

The criteria utilized to choose participants for this study included the following:

1. Teachers were the special education teachers of record in charge of preparing the student's most recent secondary transition plan of record.
2. Parents or guardians were the legal persons of record in the school files legally responsible for the student during his or her senior year of high school.
3. Administrators were a part of the high school administrative team during the graduates' senior year of high school.
4. Postsecondary mentors were currently working with the special education graduate or recently worked with the special education graduate within 1 year.

### **Location of Information**

Some of the information needed for the study was located in a traditional high school in a small rural school district in central North Carolina. All of the information regarding how to locate the parents and postsecondary mentor participants was found at the high school's student services office. The special education teacher participants were located at the high school and copies of the original secondary transition plans of the graduates were also be found at the high school. The former administrators of the special education graduates were located at various schools and administrative offices throughout the school district.

### **Information Collection**

I obtained the needed information by contacting the parents and guardians, the

special education teachers, the administrators, and the postsecondary mentors requesting their consent to participate in the study. I mailed the informed consent forms and a self-addressed, stamped envelope to the participants providing them background on the research and requesting their participation, followed up by a phone call to answer any questions they had. Once the participants provided their written informed consent to participate in the study, I utilized a proxy to collect the data in order to remove myself from any potential bias. The proxy assigned a number code to the surveys and mailed the closed-ended and open-ended surveys to the parents and guardians to respond to regarding their experiences with the secondary transition planning process and the postsecondary outcomes of their children (Appendix A). The proxy delivered the closed-ended and open-ended surveys enclosed in an envelope marked “survey” to the administrators and the special education teachers in which they were directed in the survey to anonymously seal and return their responses in the same envelope to the proxy (Appendices B and C). The proxy also mailed the closed- and open-ended surveys and self-addressed, stamped envelopes to the postsecondary mentors of the graduates (Appendix D). The proxy collected a copy of the transition plans and removed all identifiers by assigning the same number code to match the surveys before supplying them to me. The number codes were only used to link the data from the surveys and the plans in order to determine the link between any factors that attributed to individual postsecondary outcomes that were needed to complete the research.

**Instrumentation.** Specifically designed previously validated closed-ended survey instruments were adapted in this study to access the needed information. Instrumentation also included closed- and open-ended survey questions derived from construct validity using the literature and secondary transition plans. The constructs of



all of the instruments focused on the five elements of linking the secondary transition plans to the postsecondary outcomes and linking the feedback from the postsecondary outcomes back to the transition plans. The five elements that the instruments used to collect information consisted of (1) assessment of the quality of the secondary transition plans, (2) assessment of the curriculum alignment of the transition plan's intended outcomes to the student's program of studies while in high school, (3) the direct connection linking the input of Indicator 13 to the output of Indicator 14, (4) follow-up in determining short-term or long-term effects of the link between Indicators 13 and 14, and (5) the practice for using follow-up data to adjust and improve the use of transition plans in the secondary setting.

**Surveys.** Longitudinal surveys that are available for public domain from the Rehabilitation Services Administration, National Post-School Outcomes Center (2011), and NSTTAC (2008), with permission from the creators, were adapted and administered to the parents, postsecondary mentors, and teachers to determine the postsecondary successes and challenges of the special education students, the perceptions of the parents, teachers, and postsecondary mentors regarding the role of the transition planning process (Indicator 13) on postsecondary successes (Indicator 14), occurrences outside of the transition plan, the short-term or long-term effects of Indicators 13 and 14, and practices by teachers and postsecondary mentors in using postsecondary follow-up data to improve secondary transition planning (Appendix E). A review of the literature revealed that outside agency representatives such as postsecondary mentors should be involved in the transition process of students to help them achieve postsecondary success (Gil, 2007; Oertle & Trach, 2007; Test et al., 2009). Therefore, in an effort to understand more about the involvement of postsecondary mentors, the surveys administered to the postsecondary

mentors were adapted to include the following three open-ended questions based on the construct validity of this literature:

1. What role do you feel secondary transition planning played in the postsecondary outcomes of the graduate (Gil, 2007; Oertle & Trach, 2007; Test et al., 2009)?
2. How do you follow-up with the postsecondary outcomes of the graduate and how do you utilize the follow-up results (Gil, 2007; Oertle & Trach, 2007; Test et al., 2009)?
3. Is there any additional information that you would like to share?

Research shows that teachers' attitudes towards students' abilities affect the postsecondary outcomes of students and that many teachers do not feel that they adequately prepare students for postsecondary life because they are not sure how to do so (Angell et al., 2010; Gregg, 2007; Shogren et al., 2007). In order to learn more about the teachers' attitudes and knowledge of the transition process, the surveys administered to the teachers were adapted to include the following four open-ended questions through the use of construct validity:

1. What role do you feel secondary transition planning played in the postsecondary outcomes of the student (Angell et al., 2010)?
2. How do you follow-up with the postsecondary outcomes of the student and how do you utilize the follow-up results (Angell et al., 2010; Shogren, 2007)?
3. Did your attitudes and perceptions of the student's capabilities impact the postsecondary goals of the student (Gregg, 2007)?
4. Is there any additional information that you would like to share?

The surveys administered to parents were adapted to include the following three open-

ended questions through the use of construct validity based on the importance of parent collaboration during the secondary transition planning process (Ankeny et al., 2009):

1. What role do you feel secondary transition planning played in the postsecondary outcomes of your child (Ankeny et al., 2009)?
2. Describe your experience and participation with the teachers and community agency representatives in your child's secondary IEP transition planning process (Ankeny et al., 2009).
3. Is there any additional information that you would like to share?

Construct validity from the literature regarding the legal requirements of the IDEA (2004) and the role and responsibilities of educators in the transition planning process were used to survey the level of awareness of the school administrators about the transition planning process utilizing scale descriptors ranging from 1 for not at all aware, 2 for slightly aware, 3 for somewhat aware, 4 for moderately aware, and 5 for extremely aware. The following six Likert scale survey questions were used to develop a survey instrument that was given to the administrators in which the administrators rated their awareness level on a scale of 1 to 5:

1. To your knowledge, the IDEA requires all students with an IEP to have a full transition plan in place by age 16 (IDEA, 1990).
2. To your knowledge, Indicator 13 under the IDEA requires students 16 and above to have appropriate measurable postsecondary goals in alignment with the curriculum updated annually on their transition plan to help them meet their postsecondary aspirations (IDEA, 2004).
3. To your knowledge, Indicator 14 under the IDEA requires school districts to follow-up on the percentage of students with IEPs who are no longer in high school and

are competitively employed /enrolled in a postsecondary institution within 1 year of leaving high school (IDEA, 2004).

4. To your knowledge, teachers utilize feedback from the postsecondary outcomes of special education graduates to inform and improve the secondary transition process (Angell et al., 2010; Shogren, 2007).

5. To your knowledge, teachers receive consistent training or staff development about the secondary transition planning process (Angell et al., 2010; Shogren, 2007).

6. To your knowledge, teachers receive consistent training or staff development on how to adequately prepare students for postsecondary success (Benitez et al., 2009; Williams-Diehm & Lynch, 2007).

The *National Study of Transition Policies and Practices in State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies* survey taken from the Rehabilitation Services Administration was adapted and administered to the postsecondary mentor participants. I was given permission from the creators to use and adapt the Likert-scale section D entitled *Transition Services* of the survey for the purpose of this study (Appendix F). The validity and reliability of the *National Study of Transition Policies and Practices in State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies* survey is supported by the University of Minnesota and Colorado State University in which an extensive review of the literature relevant to special education and vocational rehabilitation on the transition of high school students was performed before creating the survey (Norman et al., 2006).

The *Post-School Data Collection Question Bank* survey developed by the National Post-School Outcomes Center was adapted and administered to the parents of the special education student participants with permission from the creators to utilize parts of subsection 1 entitled *Employment*, parts of section 2 entitled *Postsecondary*

*Education and Training*, and the *Current Living Status and Plans* and *High School Experiences* subsections of section 3 entitled *Quality of Life and Independent Living* for the purpose of this study (Appendix E). The questions in the survey were designed against the federal requirements of Indicator 14 transition outcomes such as postsecondary education, employment, quality of life, and independent living for validity in measuring the postsecondary outcomes of special education students who graduate or leave high school.

The *I-13 IEP Compliance Feedback Form* instrument from the NSTTAC (2008) was adapted and administered to the special education teacher participants with permission from the creators (Appendix G). Every item of the nine question survey was used for the purpose of this study along with the addition of four open-ended questions needed to provide more information in responding to the research questions than the survey provides. The *I-13 IEP Compliance Feedback Form* instrument was designed to assess the quality of transition planning in compliance with Indicator 13. The NSTTAC established a set of criteria that details the components of Indicator 13 into a checklist (Alverson et al., 2011). The same criteria taken from NSTTAC along with other criteria taken from the literature was used to assess the quality of the transition plans in the study. The NSTTAC *Indicator 13 Checklist* is used nationwide by several school districts and the *I-13 IEP Compliance Feedback Form* instrument was validated against the criteria set by the NSTTAC checklist when creating transition plans (Alverson et al., 2011).

### **Timeline**

Once the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the study and the potential participants signed the consent forms to take part in the study, I began collecting the information for the study in the fall of 2012 and completed the study in the spring of

2013 (Appendix H).

### **Use of Information**

Once all of the information was collected, I analyzed the data using content analysis and aggregated percentages to answer the proposed research questions.

**Transition plans.** My background in special education assisted in interpreting the plans through the use of content analysis to evaluate the external set of criteria that makes up a sound transition plan. I used criteria from external sources of best practices to assess the quality of the transition plans by using keywords and phrases that describe what a solid transition plan should look like. The keywords and phrases were derived from research-based characteristics of quality plans such as age appropriate and measurable postsecondary goals; curriculum and instruction services that prepare students to achieve postsecondary goals; student participation; consideration of students' strengths, needs, interests, and preferences; outside agency and parent input along with collaboration; and identification of needed services by the students in achieving their postsecondary goals (Gil, 2007; IDEA, 2004; Johnson, 2003; NSTTAC, 2008). I used the keywords and phrases to rate the quality of transition plans.

I developed a rating scale ranging from 5-25 to assess the transition plans based on the amount of keywords and phrases found in the plan that best fit within each of the following five external criteria of a quality transition plan for the purpose of the study:

1. The plan included age appropriate and measurable postsecondary goals.
2. The plan included curriculum and instruction services that prepared the student to achieve their postsecondary goals such as higher education, independent living, competitive employment, self-determination, and community experiences.
3. The plan included student participation and addresses the strengths, needs,

interests, and preferences of the students.

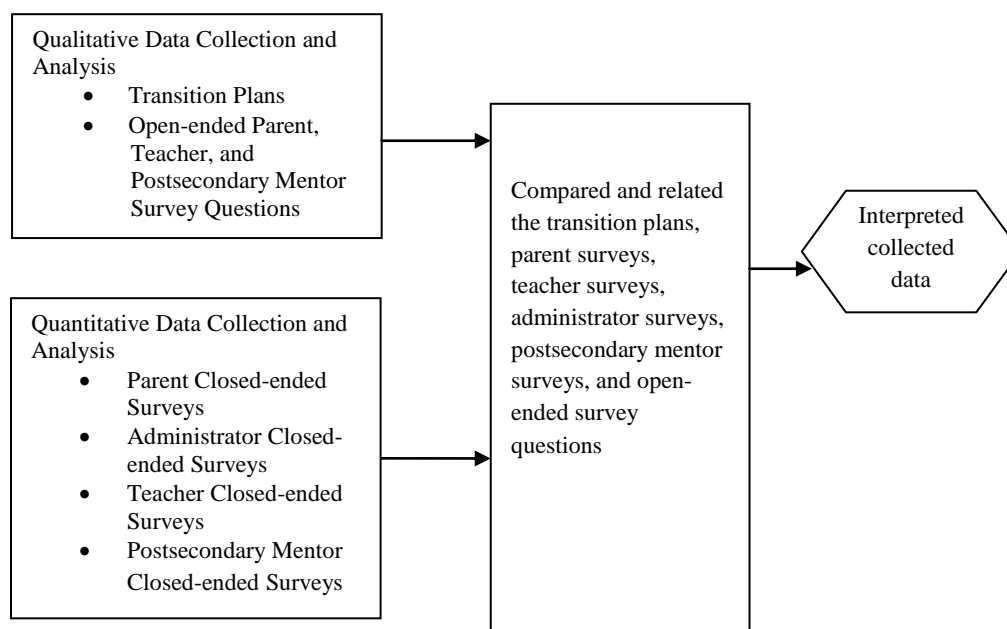
4. The plan included outside agencies such as vocational rehabilitation agencies, mental health agencies, and other servicing agencies along with teacher and parent input and collaboration.

5. The plan identified services that the student needed from outside agencies to achieve their postsecondary goals.

The rating scale was broken down by assigning 1 point for two or fewer keywords and phrases, 2 points for three to five, 3 points for six to eight, 4 points for nine to 11, and 5 points for 12 or more keywords and phrases. Once all of the keywords and phrases were tallied, the total rating for each plan consisted of 5-9 as poor, 10-14 as moderate, 15-19 as adequate, 20-24 as good, and the top score of 25 as exemplary. The ratings were used to determine the quality of the transition plans and to answer the research questions regarding the quality, effectiveness, and alignment of the plans with the secondary curriculum in meeting the postsecondary goals of the students.

**Surveys.** The results of the closed-ended survey items were analyzed using aggregated percentages in which I summed up how the majority of the participants responded to each survey question. I noted the response rate of the surveys and conducted a descriptive analysis of the closed-ended survey items. The open-ended survey items were analyzed through content analysis in which I coded the responses based on frequently used keywords or phrases in the responses to create meaningful categories.

I utilized the convergent design because it offered the ability to analyze quantitative and qualitative data separately and to compare the results, which allowed me to compare the survey results and transition plans in this study (Creswell, 2012).



*Figure 6. Study Design.*

### **Proposed Findings**

In performing this study, I expected to find that secondary transition plans aligned with the students' secondary curriculum were directly linked to postsecondary success and that a direct link between the input of Indicator 13 and the output of Indicator 14 existed as well. I also expected to find that poorly aligned transition plans were linked to a lack of postsecondary success. However, I did not expect to find much follow-up practice in using postsecondary results to guide and improve current transition plans. I also did not expect to find that many of the students would have successfully fulfilled the goals of their transition plans or would have been working towards those goals. However, I did expect to find that some of the graduates would have received some form of postsecondary success that was not outlined in the secondary transition plan or during the transition planning process.

### **Summary**

Chapter 3 provided the rationale for conducting this mixed-methods study. In



seeking to find the links between the quality and curriculum alignment of the secondary transition plans, Indicator 13 and Indicator 14, and the practice for using postsecondary follow-up data to adjust and improve secondary transition plans, I utilized a combination of qualitative and quantitative data through the convergent mixed-methods design. The study was performed through gathering a triangulation of data from a purposeful sample of the parents or guardians, former administrators, and postsecondary mentors of the special education graduates as well as the former teachers who implemented the secondary transition plans of the graduates. The results of the data were analyzed utilizing content analysis and aggregated percentages. Overall, this study focused on the quality and effectiveness of the secondary transition planning process of special education students for success in the postsecondary world.

## **Chapter 4: Results**

### **Introduction**

This study sought to answer four research questions regarding whether a systematic assessment of the quality of secondary transition plans for high school special education students and a systemic assessment of curriculum alignment of the plan's intended outcomes to the students' program of studies while in high school existed or not. The study sought to determine whether a direct connection linking the input of Indicator 13 to the output of Indicator 14 along with regular and systematic follow-up to determine short-term or long-term effects of the link between Indicators 13 and 14 existed. The study also sought to determine the presence of a defined and systematic practice for using follow-up postsecondary data to adjust and improve the use of secondary transition plans. This study also examined the perceived influences and outcomes that parents, teachers, administrators, and postsecondary mentors provided in the transitional planning process. The study examined the postsecondary successes that occurred outside the scope of the secondary transition plan as well as the factors that contributed to those successes. In seeking to gain insight about the problem, the following four research questions guided this study.

1. How does the quality of the secondary transition plan meet the proposed criteria for a sound plan?
2. How did the implementation of the curriculum design aligned with the transition plan help prepare special education students while they were in high school for meeting postsecondary challenges?
3. What are the perceived influences that parents, administrators, teachers, and postsecondary mentors provided in the transitional planning process and their outcomes?

4. What postsecondary successes occurred outside the scope of the secondary transition plan and what factors contributed to those successes?

### **Research Question 1**

How does the quality of the secondary transition plan meet the proposed criteria for a sound plan?

The purpose of Research Question 1 was to assess the quality of the special education graduates' secondary transition plans in meeting the criteria established from the literature. Thirty-nine of the 40 special education graduates of the class of 2011 secondary transition plans were analyzed based on an external set of five criteria derived from the literature as stated in Chapter 3. The keywords and phrases derived from the research that were found in the secondary transition plans that fell within the external set criteria consisted of the following.

Table 1

*Keywords and Phrases Found in Transition Plans*

Criteria	Keywords/Phrases
1. age appropriate and measurable postsecondary goals	employment, education, and training, independent living, technical college, higher education, college, university, community college, competitive employment, military, apprenticeship budget, financial management , after high school he/she will . . .
2. curriculum and instruction services that prepared the student to achieve their postsecondary goals such as higher education, independent living, competitive employment	school staff, administrator, teacher input, self-determination, self-advocacy, curriculum of study, career and technical
3. self-determination, and community experiences	courses ,community experience, training, transition activities, postsecondary services, technical college, higher education, college, university, community college, competitive employment, military, apprenticeship, student will pursue goal of . . .
4. outside agency involvement, parent and teacher input and collaboration	vocational rehabilitation, mental health agencies, disability services, parent, teacher/staff, guardian, family input, parent, guardian, or family members stated . . .
5. identifiable services needed by the student from outside agencies to achieve his or her postsecondary goals	student, parent, teacher/staff input, agency representative input, vocational rehabilitation, mental health agencies, disability services, postsecondary services, postsecondary mentors, student support

I established a rating scale ranging from 5-25 to assess the transition plans based on the amount of keywords and phrases found within a plan that met the criteria of a

quality transition plan for the purpose of the study as described in Chapter 3. The rating scale was further broken down by assigning 1 point for two or fewer keywords and phrases, 2 points for three to five, 3 points for six to eight, 4 points for nine to 11, and 5 points for 12 or more keywords and phrases. Once all of the keywords and phrases were tallied, the total rating for each plan was assigned a ranking of poor, moderate, adequate, good, or exemplary. The rankings were then used to determine the quality of the transition plans and to answer the research questions regarding the quality, effectiveness, and alignment of the plans with the secondary curriculum in meeting the postsecondary goals of the students.

More keywords were found in the plans than phrases. The following table reflects the results of the quality of the secondary transition plans based on the established rating scale.

Table 2

*Transition Plans Ratings*

Plan	Criterion 1 keywords/ phrases	Criterion 2 keywords/ phrases	Criterion 3 keywords/ phrases	Criterion 4 keywords/ phrases	Criterion 5 keywords/ phrases	Total Rating
1	2	3	2	1	2	10=Moderate
2	1	3	1	1	1	7=Poor
3	1	1	1	1	2	6=Poor
4	1	2	1	1	2	7=Poor
5	2	3	2	1	2	10=Moderate
6	2	1	1	1	1	6=Poor
7	2	2	2	2	2	10=Moderate
8	2	2	2	1	2	9=Poor
9	2	2	2	1	2	9=Poor
10	3	2	1	1	2	9=Poor
11	2	2	2	1	1	8=Poor
12	1	2	1	1	2	7=Poor
13	2	2	2	1	1	8=Poor
14	2	2	3	1	2	10=Moderate
15	1	3	2	1	2	9=Poor
16	2	3	2	1	1	9=Poor
17	2	3	2	1	1	9=Poor
18	2	3	2	1	3	11=Moderate
19	2	3	2	2	3	12=Moderate
20	2	1	3	1	1	8=Poor
21	2	2	2	1	2	9=Poor
22	2	2	2	1	1	8=Poor
23	2	3	2	1	1	9=Poor
24	1	2	1	2	2	8=Poor
25	2	3	2	1	1	9=Poor
26	2	3	2	1	2	10=Moderate
27	2	3	2	1	1	9=Poor
28	2	4	2	1	2	11=Moderate
29	2	3	2	2	2	11=Moderate
30	2	2	1	1	1	7=Poor
31	1	2	2	1	1	7=Poor
32	2	3	2	1	1	9=Poor
33	2	3	2	1	1	9=Poor
34	2	2	2	1	1	8=Poor
35	2	3	2	1	1	9=Poor
36	2	3	2	2	2	11=Moderate
37	2	3	2	1	2	10=Moderate
38	2	2	2	2	2	10=Moderate
39	2	3	2	1	1	9=Poor
Mean	1.85	2.46	1.85	1.15	1.59	8.89

The range of scores for the quality of the plans was 7-12 and none of the secondary transition plans met the criteria under the adequate, good, or exemplary range. Twelve of 39 of the secondary transition plans were found to be moderate based on the external set of criteria used to rate the plans. The remaining 27 plans were found to be poor based on the criteria. The average quality score of the plans was 8.89 and none of them rose above the upper level of poor which was 9. Even in eliminating the outlier scores (7 and 12), the transition plans still yielded an average quality score of 8.86, indicating that on average the quality of the 39 transition plans failed to meet even the lowest standard of being considered moderately successful. The mean of each criterion fell below the three point rating meaning that none of the secondary transition plans contained more than five keywords or phrases recommended by the literature to form a sound plan.

The transition planning process is supposed to be created based on students' needs, preferences, and interests along with collaboration from students, school staff, parents, and outside agency representatives (IDEA, 1990, 2004; Oertle & Trach, 2007). The IDEA (2004) required in Indicator 13 that students 16 years old and above have an active transition plan that includes appropriate measurable postsecondary goals that will reasonably enable the students to meet those postsecondary goals; however, the quality of the 2011 special education graduates' secondary transition plans did not meet the proposed criteria for a sound plan. Many of the plans consisted of filling in the blanks on the prescribed secondary transition plan template with many of the blanks left unfilled. The template included blank sections for the student's needs, strengths, preferences, and interests' information, transition assessments, course of study, education, employment, and independent living postsecondary goals, along with transition services such as

instruction, related services, community experiences, employment, adult living skills, daily living skills, and functional vocational evaluations. Table 3 below demonstrates the information provided on transition plan templates.

Table 3

*Transition Plan Template*

IDEA transition plan template required information	Percentage of plans that provided this information	Percentage of plans that failed to include this information	Percentage of plans that provided clear and original assessments of the information
Students' needs, strengths, preferences, and interests	100%	0%	46.2%
Transition assessments	84.6%	15.4%	51.3%
Course of study	84.6%	15.4%	43.6%
Education postsecondary goals	92.3%	7.7%	25.6%
Employment postsecondary goals	89.7%	10.3%	71.8%
Independent living postsecondary goals	69.2%	30.8%	51.2%
Instructional transition services	100%	0%	30.8%
Related services	94.9%	5.1%	28.2%
Community experiences transition services	94.9%	5.1%	48.7%
Employment transition services	100%	0%	58.8%
Adult living transition services	82.1%	17.9%	61.5%
Daily living transition services	89.7%	10.3%	10.3%
Functional vocational evaluation transition services	92.3%	7.7%	7.7%

Although 100% of the transition plans contained the required information



regarding the needs, strengths, preferences, and interests of the students, less than half (46.2%) of the plans provided clear assessments of the information in regards to the particular students. Eighty-four point six percent of the plans included transition assessments and 15.4% did not. Of the 84.6% of the plans that contained a course of study for the students, less than half of them (43.6%) provided clear and original assessments of the information. The majority of the plans (92.3%) contained postsecondary goals in which 25.6% of them were not derived from clear and original assessments. Many of the plans (89.7%) included postsecondary goals that provided clear and original assessments at a rate of 71.8%. However, only 69.2% of the transition plans included independent living goals with 51.2% providing clear assessments, but 30.8% of the plans did not include any independent living goals at all which defies the mandate of Indicator 13. All of the transition plans (100%) included instructional transition services; however, only 30.8% of them provided clear and original assessments of this information. Most of the plans contained transition services of related services and community experiences at a rate of 94.9% for both of the transition services, and 28.2% of the plans provided clear assessments of the related services while 48.7% of the plans provided clear assessments of the students' community experiences. All of the plans (100%) included employment transition services, and over half of them (58.8%) provided clear and original assessments of this information. Eighty-two point one percent of the plans contained some form of adult living transition services and 17.9% did not. Although many of the plans (89.7%) included daily living transition services, only 10.3% of the plans provided clear assessments of this information for the particular students. Also, a large amount of the plans (92.3%) contained functional evaluation information in the blank, but only 7.7% of the information provided clear and original

assessments of the information. Approximately, 25% of the transition plans were incomplete with one or more sections left blank. Although many of the plans provided some form of information in the required blanks, a lot of the information provided was basically for pro forma purposes and did not pertain to the intended outcomes of the students. All 39 of the plans contained the words “not applicable” in at least one or more blanks, which is unacceptable because all of the information requested on the transition plan template is applicable as required under the IDEA (2004).

According to Webb et al. (2008), the postsecondary outcomes of special education students will be limited if teachers do not view the transition planning process as more than just words on paper utilized to meet the requirements of the law. The evidences in Tables 2 and 3 suggest that the transition planning of the 2011 special education graduates failed to meet even the most basic legal requirements, not to mention the failure to meet the particular and specialized needs of the students. Therefore, the answer to Research Question 1 is that the secondary transition plans were poor in meeting the quality of the proposed criteria for a sound plan. The results of Research Question 1 indicated that many transition plans were identical and typically completed to provide documentation to fulfill state requirements with little follow-up and feedback to inform improvement. The results of the transition plans did not indicate a systematic assessment of the quality of the plans as specified in the loop that the study sought to determine if in fact existed.

## **Research Question 2**

How did the implementation of the curriculum design aligned with the transition plan help prepare special education students while they were in high school for meeting postsecondary challenges?

The purpose of Research Question 2 was to determine the curriculum alignment of the secondary transition plans and how well designed the plans were in helping the graduates accomplish their secondary to postsecondary transitions successfully. The procedures for securing data relative to this research question consisted of examining the same secondary transition plans used to answer Research Question 1 to determine whether the curriculum goals included in the transition plans aligned with the intended postsecondary goals of the plans. Table 4 below indicates the curriculum alignment results of the transition plans.

Table 4

*Transition Plan Curriculum Alignment*

Transition plan	Postsecondary Goal	Curriculum indicated on plan	Assessment of the quality of alignment
1	Become a cosmetologist	Cosmetology/self-advocacy instruction	Aligned
2	Join military	Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC)/self-advocacy instruction	Aligned
3	None stated	None stated	Not aligned
4	Become an emergency medical technician (EMT)	Automobile technology classes	Not aligned
5	Become a physical therapist	Horticulture classes	Not aligned
6	Become a veterinarian technician	Parent child development/self-advocacy instruction	Not aligned
7	Become a physical therapist	Lifetime activity classes	Aligned
8	Work in the medical field	Allied health sciences classes	Aligned
9	Become a brick mason	Masonry/ self-advocacy instruction	Aligned
10	Become a mechanic	Carpentry classes	Not aligned
11	Become a teacher	Child development/ self-advocacy instruction	Aligned
12	None stated	None stated	Not aligned
13	Become a small business manager	Computer/self-advocacy instruction	Aligned
14	Work with animals	Agriculture classes	Aligned
15	Become a contractor	Carpentry classes	Aligned
16	Work in retail	Marketing/self-advocacy instruction	Aligned
17	Become a masseuse	Allied health sciences/self-advocacy instruction	Aligned
18	Join military	JROTC classes	Aligned

(continued)

Transition plan	Postsecondary Goal	Curriculum indicated on plan	Assessment of the quality of alignment
19	Become a nurse	Child development/ self-advocacy instruction	Not Aligned
20	Become a weight trainer	Horticulture classes	Not aligned
21	Work in medical field	Art classes	Not aligned
22	Become a librarian	None stated	Not aligned
23	Become a mechanic	Automobile technology/self-advocacy instruction	Aligned
24	Attend college	None stated	Not aligned
25	Work in the automotive industry	Masonry classes	Not aligned
26	Become a mechanic	Art classes	Not aligned
27	Become an engineer	Drafting/self-advocacy instruction	Aligned
28	Work in retail	None stated	Not aligned
29	Find a job	Practical assessment exploration classes	Aligned
30	Work in sports field	Drafting classes	Not aligned
31	None stated	None stated	Not aligned
32	Work in law enforcement	Carpentry classes	Not aligned
33	Join military	JROTC/self-advocacy instruction	Aligned
34	Work in construction	Masonry/self-advocacy instruction	Aligned
35	Become a photographer	Computer classes	Not aligned
36	Become a nurse	Child development classes	Not aligned
37	Become a psychologist	Masonry	Not aligned
38	Work in automotive field	Carpentry classes	Not aligned
39	Become a mechanic	Masonry classes	Not aligned

Of the 39 transition plans reviewed for the quality of curriculum alignment, 17 included curriculum alignment with the postsecondary goals of the students and 22 did

not include a curriculum aligned with the postsecondary goals of the students. Thirteen of the 39 transition plans included curriculum alignment in self-advocacy instruction as well. Two of the 13 transition plans that included self-advocacy instruction did not demonstrate curriculum alignment with the intended postsecondary outcomes of the students. Three of the 39 transition plans did not include any postsecondary goals or curriculum courses for the students to follow. Where curriculum alignment was called for between the postsecondary goals in the transition plans and the curriculum provided for the students to enable them to meet those goals, in general the transition plans fell short. Most (56.4%) of the transition plans did not include curriculum courses aligned with the postsecondary goals of the students. Therefore, the answer to Research Question 2 is that the implementation of the curriculum design aligned with the transition plan only helped to prepare 43.6% of special education students while they were in high school for meeting postsecondary challenges. The other 56.4% of the graduates were not provided a curriculum design aligned with the postsecondary goals of their transition plans to help them in meeting postsecondary challenges. Laws such as the IDEA (2004), the Perkins Act (2006), and the *Leandro v. State* (1997) ruling mandate that students receive secondary instruction that enables them to successfully engage in postsecondary education and employment. However, over half of the special education graduates were not properly armed with a curriculum design aimed at helping them to meet postsecondary challenges and their intended postsecondary goals. Therefore, the curriculum alignment of the transition plans failed the majority of the graduates in preparation for meeting postsecondary challenges. Even more egregious is the reality that there is no structural monitoring system to ensure that the special education students are being served as their legal entitlements specify.

### Research Question 3

What are the perceived influences that parents, administrators, teachers, and postsecondary mentors provided in the transitional planning process and their outcomes?

The purpose of Research Question 3 was to determine the influences of the adults that surrounded the graduates to make the secondary transition plans successful. Surveys were distributed via a proxy to the graduates' parents, the graduates' teachers responsible for developing and executing the plans, the administrators who had oversight responsibilities for the teachers, and the postsecondary mentors of the graduates, in order to secure the data needed to answer Research Question 3. The following tables reflect the results of the parent, teacher, administrator, and postsecondary mentor survey responses.

**Parent surveys.** The surveys distributed to the parents/guardians of the special education graduates consisted of 10 closed-ended questions. Twenty-four of 39 of the parent participants contacted for the study took part in responding to the parent surveys, yielding a response rate of 61.5%. The table below outlines the closed-ended responses in aggregated percentages of the parents/guardians of the special education graduates to the survey questions.

Table 5

*Parent Survey Closed-Ended Responses*

Question	Responses				
Child competitively employed	50% Yes	50% No			
Child involved in postsecondary school or training	37.5% involved in postsecondary education	62.5% not involved in any postsecondary education			
Child's current living arrangements	58.3% live at home with parents	8.3% live on a college campus	4.2% live with spouse	4.2% live in a group home	25% did not respond
Child enrolled in secondary education career preparation courses	91.7% took a career preparation class in high school	8.3% did not respond			
Child received secondary education self-care or independent living courses	4.2% yes	95.8% no			
Child received secondary education in self-determination and self-advocacy instruction	4.2% yes	95.8% no			
Child had a detailed secondary transition plan	95.8% yes	4.2% no			
Child was prepared for postsecondary challenges while in high school	16.7% somewhat prepared	8.3% very prepared	8.3% not prepared	66.7% no response	
Child was referred to a community agency while in high school	87.5% yes	12.5% no			
Child has a postsecondary mentor or community agency representative	37.5% yes	62.5% No			

The closed-ended survey questions involved various answers from yes or no to



multiple choice responses that provided a lot of insight into the secondary transition planning process and the postsecondary outcomes of the graduates. The results of the closed-ended parent surveys indicated that half of the graduates were currently employed and half of the graduates were currently unemployed. The majority of the graduates (62.5%) were not enrolled in college and most of the graduates (58.3%) were still living at home with their parents. An overwhelming majority of the parents (91.7%) indicated that their child participated in career preparation courses in high school. However, only a small percentage of the parents (4.2%) indicated that their child engaged in self-care and self-advocacy courses during high school. The other (95.8%) of the parents indicated that their child did not receive self-care or self-advocacy courses, but a review of the transition plans revealed that 33.3% of the students were exposed to some type of self-advocacy or self-care secondary coursework. Therefore the perceptions of the parents regarding self-care and self-advocacy instruction were not reflected by the content in the transition plans, which may be a result of poor communication to the parents on the part of the high school staff. Most of the parents (95.8%) indicated that their child had a detailed secondary transition plan; however, only 16.7% of the parents felt that the transition plan prepared their child for postsecondary challenges. The 66.7% of the parents who chose not to respond to the question regarding whether they felt their child was prepared for postsecondary challenges while in high school may not have fully understood the question or possibly just simply skipped it because it was one of the few questions on the survey that contained a long list of options. Eighty-seven point five percent of the parents responded that their child was referred to a community agency during high school, but only 37.5% of the graduates reportedly had a postsecondary mentor or agency representative.

The parent surveys also consisted of three open-ended questions. The table below outlines the open-ended responses of the parent survey questions.

Table 6

*Parent Survey Opened-Ended Responses: Transition Planning Follow-up*

Question	Responses
What role do you feel secondary transition planning played in the postsecondary outcomes of your child?	Helpful but my child is not a citizen and don't have a lot of opportunities  None  None at all

The few parents who chose to respond to this question indicated that they did not feel that the secondary transition planning process played a role in the postsecondary outcomes of their children.

Table 7

*Parent Survey Opened-Ended Responses: Experiences with Teachers and Postsecondary Mentors*

Question	Responses
Describe your experience and participation with the teachers and community agency representatives/postsecondary mentors in your child's secondary IEP transition planning process?	The transition meetings were great  Not a lot of help after graduation  I had a great experience with the teachers  Teachers were great explaining what needed to be done but lacked in getting all things done

The responses to the second open-ended survey questions regarding the parents' experiences and participation with the teachers and agency representatives/postsecondary mentors during the secondary transition planning process indicated that the parents had good experiences with the secondary transition planning process. However, the parents did not feel that the teachers and postsecondary mentors followed through with helping their children accomplish the postsecondary goals set forth by their secondary transition plans.

None of the parents chose to respond to the additional information question as demonstrated in Table 8 below.

Table 8

*Parent Survey Opened-Ended Responses: Additional Information*

Question	Responses
Is there any additional information that you would like to share?	None given

The three opened-ended questions of the parent survey were often skipped by the parents and only a few parents chose to answer at least one of the three open-ended questions. The theme of the parent's open-ended responses indicated that the transition planning process did not play a role in the postsecondary outcomes of the students and support from teachers and postsecondary mentors in attaining the intended postsecondary goals of the students was basically nonexistent. One parent indicated that the high school teachers did a great job in explaining what needed to be done to prepare the students for transition from the secondary level to the postsecondary level "but lacked in getting all

things done.” By way of summary, the parents in general felt that they had a greater role in the postsecondary transition process of their children because the teachers and postsecondary mentors (agency representatives) fell short of supporting them after their children graduated from high school. The parents also felt that they did not have much of a role in shaping or understanding the transition plans from inception to implementation, but felt that the secondary teachers did a great job of creating and implementing the transition plans.

**Administrator surveys.** The administrator surveys were distributed to four administrators including the principal and the three assistant principals of the 2011 special education graduates during their senior year of high school. All four of the administrators participated in the survey questions. The results of the administrator survey below consisted of six questions with a response rating scale of 1-5 with 1 meaning not at all aware, 2 meaning slightly aware, 3 meaning somewhat aware, 4 meaning moderately aware, and 5 meaning extremely aware.

Table 9

*Administrator Survey Closed-Ended Responses*

Questions	Total (N)	Not at all aware (n)	Slightly aware (n)	Somewhat aware (n)	Moderately aware (n)	Extremely aware (n)
1. To your knowledge, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires all students with an IEP to have a full transition plan in place by age 16.	4	0	0	2	1	1
2. To your knowledge, Indicator 13 under IDEA requires students 16 and above to have appropriate measurable postsecondary goals in alignment with the curriculum updated annually on their transition plan to help them meet their postsecondary aspirations.	4	0	0	3	0	1
3. To your knowledge, Indicator 14 under IDEA requires school districts to follow-up on the percentage of students with Individual Education Plans (IEP) who are no longer in high school and are competitively employed /enrolled in a postsecondary institution within one year of leaving high school.	4	0	1	1	1	1
4. To your knowledge, teachers utilize feedback from the postsecondary outcomes of special education graduates to inform and improve the secondary transition process.	4	0	1	3	0	0
5. To your knowledge, teachers receive consistent training or staff development about the secondary transition planning process.	4	0	1	3	0	0
6. To your knowledge, teachers receive consistent training or staff development on how to adequately prepare students for postsecondary success.	4	0	0	3	1	0

For question 1, only one of the administrators indicated being “extremely aware” that the IDEA (1990) requires all students with an IEP to have a full transition plan in place by age 16 and one administrator indicated being “moderately aware” of this law while the other two indicated being “somewhat aware” of the law. Three of the administrators responded that they were “somewhat aware” that Indicator 13 under the IDEA (2004) requires students 16 years old and above to have appropriate measurable postsecondary goals in alignment with the curriculum updated annually on their transition plans and one administrator responded as being “extremely aware” of the requirement. The administrator responses varied widely when it came to question 3 regarding the fact that Indicator 14 under the IDEA (2004) requires school districts to follow-up on the percentage of students with IEPs who are no longer in high school and are competitively employed/enrolled in a postsecondary institution within 1 year of leaving high school. One administrator indicated being “slightly aware” of the requirement, one indicated being “somewhat aware” of the requirement, one indicated being “moderately aware” of the requirement, and the other administrator indicated being “extremely aware” of the Indicator 14 requirement. Only one of the administrators indicated being “slightly aware” that teachers use feedback from the postsecondary outcomes of special education graduates to inform and improve the secondary transition process and the other three administrators responded that they were “somewhat aware” that teachers use postsecondary feedback. Question 5 also indicated that one administrator was “slightly aware” that teachers receive consistent training or staff development about the secondary transition planning process and three of the administrators were “somewhat aware” of this. Three of the administrators indicated on question 6 that they were “somewhat aware” that teachers receive consistent training or staff development on how to

adequately prepare students for postsecondary success and one administrator indicated being “moderately aware” of this. None of the administrators chose a rating of 1 for any of the responses that would have indicated that they were not at all aware of the secondary transition planning process that occurred in their school in 2011. At a rate of 12.5%, the administrators chose a response rating of 2, 4, and 5. Interestingly, 62.5% of the administrators chose a response rating of 3, indicating that they were somewhat aware of the policies and procedures of the secondary transition planning process in the high school. Such a response rating demonstrates uncertainty among the administrators when it comes to understanding the requirements of Indicators 13 and 14 and even more uncertainty as to what was actually going on with the special education students.

By way of summary, the administrator surveys indicated that they were mostly somewhat aware of the secondary transition planning process and postsecondary outcomes but that they mainly relied on the teachers to oversee the transition process making their influences limited. When asked if teachers received training on secondary transition planning and how to prepare students for postsecondary success, most of the administrators indicated that they were only somewhat aware of such training. Some researchers suggest that teachers should be trained in how their attitudes and beliefs towards students influence the transition planning process and how to better prepare students for postsecondary success, but little evidence from the administrator survey results indicated that such training frequently occurred at the high school site in this study (Herbert et al., 2010; Li et al., 2009; Webb et al., 2008).

For question 5 which stated, “to your knowledge, teachers receive consistent training or staff development about the secondary transition planning process,” the administrators overwhelmingly chose a rating of 3 meaning that they were not really

aware of any consistent secondary transition training taking place in the high school. Coincidentally, in a study about the perceived value of transition assessments by transition personnel, teachers and counselors indicated that they do not receive adequate training in dealing with transition issues and in collaborating with parents and the community (Herbert et al., 2010). Results of the same study also suggest that high school staff does not understand their roles and duties when it comes to transition planning (Herbert et al., 2010). Therefore, the results of the administrator survey indicated that the administrators need to take on more oversight responsibilities in making sure that the teachers are properly trained in transition planning and strictly follow the regulations of Indicators 13 and 14 under the IDEA (2004). Also, little evidence of monitoring by the administrators exists; however, it is hard to monitor a program effectively if one does not know or understand the program.

**Teacher surveys.** The teacher surveys consisted of 10 closed-ended questions (regarding the quality of the transition plans as perceived by the teachers) with a Likert scale rating that ranged from 1-5 with 1= never or almost never, 2=occasionally, 3=half the time, 4=frequently, 5=always or almost always. All 13 teachers responsible for writing the secondary transition plans of the 39 special education graduates participated in the surveys. The table below presents the measures of how well all of the participating teachers assessed each of the 39 transition plans that they wrote.



Table 10

*Teacher Survey Closed-Ended Responses*

Questions	Total (N)	Never or almost Never (n)	Occasionally (n)	Half the time (n)	Frequently (n)	Always or almost always (n)
1. Did the IEP transition plan include appropriate measurable postsecondary goals that cover education or training, competitive employment, and independent living, self-determination, and community experiences?	39	0	0	4	13	22
2. Did the IEP transition plan include postsecondary goals that were updated annually with the input and collaboration of parents?	39	0	0	3	20	16
3. Did the IEP transition plan include measurable postsecondary goals that were based on age-appropriate transition assessments?	39	0	0	9	27	3
4. Did the IEP transition plan include transition services that reasonably enabled the student to meet his or her postsecondary goals such as school-to-work programs, competitive employment preparation, etc.?	39	0	4	4	24	7
5. Did the IEP transition plan include transition services that included curriculum and instruction that reasonably enabled the student to meet his or her postsecondary goals?	39	0	0	1	15	23

(continued)

Questions	Total (N)	Never or almost Never (n)	Occasionally (n)	Half the time (n)	Frequently (n)	Always or almost always (n)
6. Did the IEP transition plan include annual IEP goal(s) related to the student's postsecondary goals/transition services needs?	39	0	1	5	19	14
7. Did you collaborate with the parents and students in writing the postsecondary goals of the student?	39	0	0	8	17	14
8. Is there evidence that the student was invited to the IEP team transition planning meeting?	39	0	0	0	0	39
9. Is there evidence that a representative of any participating agency was invited to the IEP Team transition meeting with the prior consent of the parent or student who has reached the age of majority?	39	0	1	0	27	11
10. Overall, did the student's last written IEP meet the requirements of Indicator 13?	39	0	0	0	15	24

None of the teachers chose 1 for any of their responses to the survey questions.

Most of the teachers (56.4%) overwhelmingly chose “always or almost always” for question 1, indicating that the transition plans included appropriate measurable postsecondary goals. For question 2, most (51.3%) of the teachers indicated that the transition plans “frequently” included postsecondary goals that were updated annually with the input and collaboration of parents. Sixty-nine point two percent of the teachers

responded that the transition plan “frequently” included measurable postsecondary goals that were based on age-appropriate transition assessments. Many of the teachers (61.5%) responded that the transition plan “frequently” included transition services that reasonably enabled the students to meet his or her postsecondary goals. For question 5, most of the teachers (59%) indicated that the transition plans “always or almost always” included transition services that included curriculum and instruction that reasonably enabled students to meet their postsecondary goals. However, the assessment of the quality of curriculum alignment of the transition plans used for this study does not reflect these perceptions. Therefore, the teachers appeared to have false perceptions of the curriculum alignment of the transition plans that they wrote for the 2011 graduates. Most of the teacher survey responses (48.7%) indicated that the transition plan “frequently” included annual IEP goals related to the students’ postsecondary goals and transition services needs. In response to question 7, 43.6% of the teachers’ responses indicated that they “frequently” collaborated with the parents and students in writing the postsecondary goals of the students, and 36% of the responses indicated that this occurred “always or almost always.” Interestingly, everyone (100%) chose a rating of 5, “always or almost always,” for question 8 which stated, “is there evidence that the student was invited to the IEP team transition planning meeting” mainly because a student invitation is required for every IEP meeting once a student turns 14 years of age in order for the IEP to be compliant. The majority of the responses (69.2%) for question 9 indicated that a postsecondary mentor (agency representative) was invited to the transition meetings “frequently.” Sixty-one point five percent of the responses to question 10 indicated that the students’ transition plans “always or almost always” met the requirements of Indicator 13. Most of the teachers chose the higher ratings of 4 and 5 as their responses.

The responses were analyzed through aggregated percentages and 2% of the respondents chose a rating of 2, 9% chose a rating of 3, 44% chose a rating of 4, and 45% chose a rating of 5. Therefore, the results of the closed-ended teacher survey responses indicated that teachers in general felt that all of their transition plans were well written and successfully met the requirements of Indicator 13, a perception that is not reflected in the actual analysis of the plans themselves.

The four open-ended teacher survey responses consisted of the following frequent responses that were used to generate common themes through content analysis. Table 11 below represents the responses from the teachers regarding the role that they felt the secondary transition planning process had on the postsecondary outcomes of the students.

Table 11

*Teacher Survey Open-Ended Responses: Role of Transition Planning on Outcomes*

Question	Responses
What role do you feel secondary transition planning played in the postsecondary outcomes of the student?	<p>The plan prepared students for their postsecondary goals</p> <p>Secondary transition planning is not necessary because parents make the decisions for their children</p> <p>Many students did not need a transition plan to successfully meet their goals</p> <p>Some planning played a role in the outcomes</p> <p>The plan was only significant for needier students who did not have parental or community support</p> <p>The plan had a limited role in postsecondary outcomes</p> <p>Students had unrealistic goals</p> <p>The plan is more geared to preparing students for postsecondary employment instead of postsecondary education</p>

The open-ended teacher responses regarding the role of the secondary transition planning process on the postsecondary outcomes of the students indicated that the teachers felt that the secondary transition plans played a limited role in the postsecondary outcomes of the graduates due to a variety of reasons. The teachers felt that the parents often made postsecondary decisions for their children and that many of the students had unrealistic postsecondary goals. Interestingly, the parents and the teachers were in agreement on this perception but from very different perspectives. The parents felt that they had to make all of the postsecondary decisions for their children because they felt that the teachers were of little or no support in the area. The teachers, in turn, abdicated all of the postsecondary responsibility to the parents because they felt that the parents wanted control. Unfortunately, such a lack of clear communication and collaboration by the parents and the teachers caused the students to receive incoherent and uneven services.

The following table indicates the attitudes and perceptions of the teachers regarding the postsecondary goals of the special education students while they were in high school.

Table 12

*Teacher Survey Open-Ended Responses: Attitudes and Perceptions*

Question	Responses
How did your attitudes and perceptions of the student's capabilities impact the postsecondary goals of the student?	<p>I don't think that my attitudes or perceptions impacted the student's goals</p> <p>They did not</p> <p>The parents impacted the student outcomes more than I did</p> <p>Yes, I was very involved with helping my students and parents achieve the postsecondary goals of the students</p>

Most of the teachers responded that their attitudes and perceptions of the capabilities of their students did not impact the postsecondary goals of the students and that the parents of the students had the most impact on the students' postsecondary goals.

Table 13 below reflects the postsecondary follow-up procedures of the graduates performed by the teachers.

Table 13

*Teacher Survey Open-Ended Responses: Follow-up*

Question	Responses
How do you follow-up with the postsecondary outcomes of the student and how do you utilize the follow-up results?	<p>Follow-up with phone calls and emails to the parents, other family members, and friends of the students</p> <p>Periodic checkups</p> <p>Not intentionally unless I hear about the student from someone</p> <p>Do not follow-up</p> <p>Sometime visit student jobsites</p> <p>Follow-up through hearsay</p> <p>Do not utilize any follow-up results</p>

The results to the open-ended question regarding following up with the graduates to find out if they were successful in their postsecondary outcomes indicated that the teachers rarely follow-up with the graduates and when they do it is inconsistent. The results also indicated that the teachers do not utilize the follow-up results to inform and improve secondary transition planning or to determine the link between Indicator 13 and Indicator 14. Therefore, in the minds of the teachers, there is no information loop with which they can improve their practice. Without follow-up or sustainable sources of feedback, there can be no improvement loop.

The following table presents the additional information shared by the teachers on the open-ended survey.

Table 14

*Teacher Survey Open-Ended Responses: Additional Information*

Question	Responses
Is there any additional information that you would like to share?	<p>Need more transition activities for students in self-contained classes because too much focus is on OCS students when it comes to transition</p> <p>Little to no postsecondary agencies available for students with learning disabilities and higher IQs, most postsecondary agencies like vocational rehabilitation only help OCS students</p> <p>The transition process is more significant for lower functioning students along with parent and community support but meaningless for higher functioning students</p> <p>No</p>

Most of the teachers did not offer any additional information to share, but the few who chose to supply additional information indicated that students on the occupational course of study (OCS) benefitted more from secondary transition planning than lower functioning students with more severe disabilities or higher functioning students with less severe disabilities.

The themes that most often occurred in the four open-ended responses to the teacher surveys mostly centered on the secondary transition plan being limited in helping students achieve postsecondary goals with little influence from teachers, minimal teacher follow-up, and minimal assistance from outside postsecondary agencies. Such



perceptions from the teachers reflected the poor quality of most of the secondary transition plans written by teachers which indicated that the transition plans may be limited because of their poor quality. Even more challenging is finding strategies for improving these conditions given the absence of high quality follow-up, performance feedback, and/or program monitoring. The administrator surveys indicated that the administrators were only somewhat aware that teachers followed up with special education graduates and used the feedback for program improvement, which is evidence that the teachers had little administrative monitoring and oversight. Apparently, no one with any authority ever questioned the teachers about their follow-up procedures with the graduates, program improvement, and performance accountability.

Although research indicates that teachers' attitudes towards students' abilities affect the postsecondary outcomes of students, most of the teachers responded in the survey that their attitudes and perceptions did not impact the postsecondary outcomes of the students (Angell et al., 2010; Gregg, 2007; Shogren et al., 2007). By way of summary, the teacher surveys indicated that many of the special education teachers in general felt that they did not have any influence on the postsecondary outcomes of the students and that the parents and students were more responsible for the outcomes. The parent survey responses tended to corroborate this because the parents often indicated that they did not receive a lot of postsecondary support from anyone. The teacher survey also indicated that many of the teachers felt that they had limited influences on the transitional planning processes of the students and the students' unrealistic goals and parental decision making influenced the transitional planning process more. Research shows that teachers hold the perception that parents are unrealistic about the postsecondary possibilities of their children and that teachers hold misconceptions about

the abilities of special education students in achieving postsecondary goals which lead to limited postsecondary outcomes (Herbert et al., 2010; Thoma et al., 2008; Webb et al., 2008).

In comparing the results of the parent surveys to the teacher responses regarding attitudes and influences about the secondary transition planning process, the few parents who responded to the open-ended question indicated that they did not feel that secondary transition planning played a role in the postsecondary outcomes of their children. The same parents also indicated that their experiences and participation with the teachers and agency representatives went well during the secondary transition planning process, but the teachers and agency representatives did not provide them with much assistance in helping their children achieve their intended postsecondary goals in which the majority of the teachers agreed based on their responses regarding their perceptions of the effects of the secondary transition planning process and the postsecondary outcomes.

**Postsecondary mentor surveys.** Nine of the 2011 special education graduates reportedly had postsecondary mentors. The postsecondary mentors of the special education graduates consisted of four vocational rehabilitation counselor participants who were given a 13 closed-ended question survey to complete on nine of the graduates whose mentors could be located. Only 23% of the graduates' reported postsecondary mentors could be located for this study; however, 87.5% of the parents indicated that their child was referred to such a representative while in high school, and only 37.5% of the parents indicated that their child actually had such a representative on the parent survey. No other potential postsecondary mentors were identified by the parent participants of the special education graduates. The rating scale for the 13 closed-ended postsecondary mentor survey questions ranged from 1 to 5 with 1= never or almost never,

2=occasionally, 3=half the time, 4=frequently, 5=always or almost always. The table below revealed the following results.

Table 15

*Postsecondary Mentor Survey Closed-Ended Responses*

Question	Total (N)	Never or almost never (n)	Occasionally (n)	Half the time (n)	Frequently (n)	Always or almost always (n)
1. You participated in an IEP/transition plan for the graduate before the individual completed high school.	9	0	4	1	0	4
2. You communicated with local education agency personnel to discuss helpful approaches and strategies for the graduate.	9	0	2	0	0	7
3. You provided career counseling and guidance services to the graduate.	9	0	0	0	4	5
4. You conducted or sponsored appropriate transition/vocational assessments to determine the service needs of the graduate in the areas of postsecondary education and employment.	9	0	0	1	4	4
5. You participated in supporting the graduate in work-based learning, career and technical education, and other vocational services.	9	0	1	0	1	7
6. You arranged for participation of the graduate in unpaid work experiences.	9	7	1	0	0	1
7. You arranged for the participation of the graduate in paid work experiences.	9	0	0	0	0	9

(continued)

Question	Total (N)	Never or almost never (n)	Occasionally (n)	Half the time (n)	Frequently (n)	Always or almost always (n)
8. You advised local education agency staff to help them determine the accommodations and the assistive technology needed by the graduate while the individual was still in high school, in order to achieve postsecondary education and/or employment goals.	9	0	9	0	0	0
9. You arranged for job coaches and other resources needed for the graduate to participate in community-based employment.	9	4	1	0	0	4
10. You provided support to the graduate in postsecondary education after exiting high school (for example by providing supports related to transportation, tuition, books, dormitory costs, assistive technology, personal counseling, professional tutoring, job coaching and job development).	9	6	0	0	0	3
11. You provided support to the graduate to participate in vocational training (e.g. by providing supports related to transportation, tuition, books, dormitory costs, assistive technology, personal counseling, professional tutoring, job coaching and job development).	9	3	0	0	2	4
12. You follow-up on the graduate who has moved on to postsecondary education or employment and connect him/her with resources when appropriate.	9	0	0	0	4	5

(continued)

Question	Total (N)	Never or almost never (n)	Occasionally (n)	Half the time (n)	Frequently (n)	Always or almost always (n)
13. You facilitated placement of the graduate in employment and training prior to high school graduation, with plans for post-graduation follow-up.	9	8	0	1	0	0

Most of the postsecondary mentors indicated that they “occasionally” (44.4%) or “always or almost always” (44.4%) participated in the transition planning for the graduates before they completed high school. Most of the postsecondary mentors (77.7%) indicated they “always or almost always” communicated with local education agency personnel to discuss helpful approaches and strategies for the graduates. The majority of the postsecondary mentors responded in question 3 that they either “frequently” (44.4%) or “always or almost always” (55.5%) provided career counseling and guidance services to the graduates. Most of the postsecondary mentors indicated that they “frequently” (44.4%) or “always or almost always” (44.4%) participated in supporting the graduates in work-based learning, career and technical education, and other vocational services. The majority of the mentors pointed out that they “never or almost never” (77.7%) arranged for participation of the graduates in unpaid work experiences, but pointed out that they overwhelmingly “always or almost always” (100%) arranged for paid work experiences for the graduates. In response to question 8, the mentors overwhelming indicated that they “occasionally” (100%) advised local education agency staff to help them determine the accommodations and the assistive technology needed by the graduates while the students were still in high school, in order to achieve

postsecondary education and employment goals. However, if the postsecondary mentors had been more insistent in this area, then it could have made a difference in the failed intended postsecondary outcomes of many of the graduates. The postsecondary mentors were at opposite ends of the rating scale when it came to question 9 regarding whether they arranged for job coaches and other resources needed for the graduates to participate in community-based employment. The majority of the mentors either chose “never or almost never” (44.4%) or “always or almost always” (44.4%) for the response to survey question 9. Interestingly, most of the mentors indicated that they “never or almost never” (66.6%) provided support to the graduates to participate in postsecondary education, which is a major responsibility of the postsecondary mentors. However, most of the postsecondary mentors indicated that they “always or almost always” (44.4%) provided support to the graduates to participate in vocational training. In response to question 12, the postsecondary mentors indicated that they follow-up with graduates who move on to postsecondary education or employment and connect them with resources when appropriate “frequently” (44.4%) or “always or almost always” (55.5%), and utilize the follow-up information to assist the graduates as needed. For the last question, the postsecondary mentors overwhelmingly indicated that they “never or almost never” (88.8%) facilitated placement of the graduates in employment and training prior to high school graduation. However, it is typically the responsibility of the high school staff in collaboration with postsecondary mentors to assist students with employment and training prior to high school graduation.

The closed-ended responses to the postsecondary mentor surveys indicated a 23.9% response rating of never or almost never, a 15.4% rating of occasionally, a 2.6% rating of half the time, a 12.8% rating of frequently, and a 45.3% rating of always or

almost always. It is interesting to point out that question 7, which read “you arranged for the participation of the graduate in paid work experiences,” always received a response rating of 5 meaning that this always or almost always occurred for the graduates served by the postsecondary mentors who participated in the survey, therefore indicating that most of the graduates served by the vocational rehabilitation postsecondary mentors were exposed to some type of employment opportunities. However, the postsecondary mentors neglected to help many of the graduates secure employment or any other postsecondary aspirations.

The tables below demonstrate the frequent responses to the three open-ended questions on the postsecondary mentor surveys that followed a theme of consistent postsecondary follow-up with the graduates by the postsecondary mentors.

Table 16

*Postsecondary Mentor Survey Open-Ended Responses: Role of Transition Planning on Graduates' Outcomes*

Question	Responses
What role do you feel secondary transition planning played in the postsecondary outcomes of the graduate?	<p>Made student self-sufficient</p> <p>Made student confident and determined to succeed</p> <p>Provided many students with unattainable goals</p> <p>Allowed student to accommodate his disability and ask for help when needed</p>

The responses of the postsecondary mentors regarding the role that they felt the secondary transition plan played in the postsecondary outcomes of the graduates revealed



that secondary transition planning successfully provided students with self-determination skills but often provided students with unattainable postsecondary goals.

The following table represents the responses of the postsecondary mentors regarding postsecondary follow-up.

Table 17

*Postsecondary Mentor Survey Open-Ended Responses: Postsecondary Follow-up*

Question	Responses
How do you follow-up with the postsecondary outcomes of the graduate and how do you utilize the follow-up results?	Follow-up annually and use the results to provide guidance based on graduate’s needs
	Lost track of graduate due to the graduate frequently relocating
	Follow-up every 30- 90 days due to her intensive needs
	Follow-up with the college student every semester and discuss his progress with him

The data revealed that the postsecondary mentors consistently follow-up with the special education graduates that they serve and utilize the follow-up results to help the graduates obtain postsecondary success.

Table 18 below presents additional information shared by the postsecondary mentors.

Table 18

*Postsecondary Mentor Survey Open-Ended Responses: Additional Information*

Question	Responses
Is there any additional information that you would like to share?	<p>The family did not work well with the high school staff</p> <p>No</p>

The postsecondary mentors did not have much additional information to share. However, one of the postsecondary mentors pointed out that the family of one of the graduates did not collaborate well with the high school teachers when the graduate was in high school which could have influenced the lack of success of the graduate in achieving the intended postsecondary goals.

By way of summary, the responses to the postsecondary mentor surveys indicated that the agency representatives were split on their involvement in the secondary transition planning process with half responding that they occasionally participated in the transition planning of the graduates and half responding that they always or almost always participated in the transition planning of the graduates. Although the federal law of the IDEA (2004) and the conceptual framework of this study indicated that agency representatives should be a part of the secondary transition planning process, half of the postsecondary mentors did not feel like they were a part of that process (Kolher, 1996). The postsecondary mentors' responses indicated that they felt that they had more of an influence on the postsecondary outcomes of the graduates than on the secondary transition planning process because they became more involved with helping the

graduates after high school. However, the postsecondary mentors did point out that the secondary transition planning process made many of the graduates that they work with more self-sufficient, but the graduates' lack of full cooperation with them has played a major influence in their lack of success. One of the postsecondary mentors stated:

I have been attempting to contact one of the graduates monthly but she relocates frequently. I keep trying to provide job placement and job coaching services but she will not leave me a forwarding phone number or address, so I try to track her down in the state database.

In regards to a data-based description of the adult support system (parents, teachers, administrators, and postsecondary mentors) for helping the special education high school students, this system can best be described as not particularly collaborative. Where these influences should come together to make student success as reasonable as possible, what the research revealed was a lack of communication, a lack of follow-up, and even a seeming inability of the adult support system to meet with one another to find common ground that would have better served the students during the secondary and postsecondary transition process. Indeed, the research revealed that students who had postsecondary mentors were the least successful in achieving postsecondary success.

Interestingly, the majority of the graduates who reportedly had postsecondary mentors were not employed, and only two were enrolled in a college or university. This was interesting because all of the reported postsecondary mentors were from community agencies such as vocational rehabilitation, and research indicates that interagency collaboration during the secondary transition planning process is vital in helping students achieve their postsecondary goals and that students who receive vocational rehabilitation services have improved chances of gaining employment after high school (Kellums &

Morningstar, 2010; Neubert et al., 2002; Oertle & Trach, 2007; Williams-Diehm & Lynch, 2007). However, a recent case study on college students with disabilities suggests that the success of special education graduates is not the result of one type of community agency, but combined efforts with high schools and vocational rehabilitation centers is crucial in leading to positive outcomes for special education graduates (Barber, 2012). The IDEA (2004) also mandated that an agency representative be invited to any IEP meeting in which transition services are being discussed once the student turns 16 years of age. According to the Kohler (1996) taxonomy that was used for the conceptual framework in this study, interagency collaboration is an important component of the secondary transition planning process in helping students gain postsecondary success. Interestingly, many parents reported that their children were referred to a community agency such as vocational rehabilitation prior to graduation from high school but they did not consider the postsecondary mentors any more instrumental than the teachers were in helping their children achieve successful postsecondary outcomes, therefore raising some questions with the research.

Therefore, the answer to Research Question 3 is that the perceived influences that the parents, teachers, administrators, and postsecondary mentors provided in the transitional planning process was that the transition planning process was a mere protocol that had to be done for the sake of compliance which appeared to have a minimal effect on the postsecondary outcomes of the graduates. In fact, most of the survey results indicated levels of support not seen in the actual assessment of the transition plans themselves.

#### **Research Question 4**

What postsecondary successes occurred outside the scope of the secondary

transition plan and what factors contributed to those successes?

In looking for successes that emerged from the transition plans and how they came about, Research Question 4 examined the postsecondary successes that occurred outside of the intended outcomes of the plan. In order to gather information regarding this research question, the transition plans and the survey results were examined in greater depth, particularly the parent and postsecondary mentor surveys. Of the 39 original plans studied, 24 also had corresponding parent surveys. Of the 24 corresponding parent surveys, seven of the parents indicated that their children found postsecondary success outside of the intended goals of their transition plans. Under the IDEA (2004), Indicator 14 defined successful postsecondary outcomes as being

enrolled in higher education within one year of leaving high school, enrolled in higher education or competitively employed within one year of leaving high school, enrolled in higher education, or in some other postsecondary education or training program, or competitively employed or in some other employment within one year of leaving high school. (p. 118)

Therefore, by definition of the federal mandate, the graduates are considered to have found postsecondary success although their successes were not a part of the intended postsecondary goals outlined in their secondary transition plans.

Cases of the seven graduates who found postsecondary success outside the realm of their transition plans included the following. Case one involved a graduate working at a local factory who had planned to attend community college to study nursing, according to the secondary transition plan. Case two involved another graduate working in a local factory instead of attending college to study auto mechanics as the transition plan indicated. Similar to cases one and two, case three included a graduate working in a local

factory instead of attending technical school to become a masseuse as indicated on the secondary transition plan. Case four also involved a graduate who found success working in a local factory instead of following the intended outcomes of the transition plan to join the military. Case five was centered on a graduate who enrolled in a community college, but had a secondary transition plan that did not include any type of higher education because his postsecondary goal was to find a job as a mason after taking CTE masonry classes in high school. The factor that contributed to this particular graduate choosing to enroll in community college instead becoming a brick mason, according to his postsecondary mentor, was the lack of masonry employment opportunities in the area in which the graduate lived. Case six included a student working in the retail industry instead of attending college to study for a career in the medical field. Case seven involved a graduate working in the restaurant industry instead of attending college. However, this particular student had a postsecondary goal of owning a restaurant after attending college. Therefore, this particular student was pursuing postsecondary goals similar to the intended goals of the secondary transition plan but just in a different manner than what was outlined in the plan.

The parents offered very little additional information about the factors that contributed to the successes of their children. Based on the responses to the parent surveys, the parents felt that neither the high school teachers nor the postsecondary mentors contributed to the successes of the graduates. Most of the parent responses indicated that they were responsible for helping their children find postsecondary success. As one parent stated, “the teachers and postsecondary mentors provided me with a lot of information, but they didn’t really help me get my child what he needed.” One of the teachers who wrote the transition plan of one of the successful graduates indicated that

she often followed up with the graduate via “phone calls and emails.” However, she did not indicate that she assisted the student in finding postsecondary success or how she utilized the follow-up information. Therefore, relative to Research Question 4, the data revealed limited indicators of transition success. Only seven of the 39 original cases described above were included (18%), thereby making any broad conclusions suspect. While success stories can be described, the data do not reveal the status of the postsecondary success for the 15 of the 39 graduates whose parents did not respond to the survey.

Therefore, the answer to Research Question 4 is that the postsecondary successes that occurred outside the scope of the secondary transition plan consisted mainly of graduates who found some type of employment regardless of whether or not it was within their intended field of interest, and limited data is available from the study to indicate the factors that contributed to these successes.

## **Summary**

Chapter 4 outlined the results of this study in order to answer the four research questions. Several themes arose from the research findings surrounding the existence or nonexistence of the loop linking secondary transition to postsecondary outcomes such as the lack of postsecondary follow-up by teachers, the lack of systematic assessments of the link between the effects of Indicators 13 and 14, and ineffective secondary transition plans to name a few. The results of the disaggregated data from this chapter through the use of secondary transition plan assessments and closed-ended and open-ended surveys will be used to further discuss the findings and their meanings in Chapter 5.

## **Chapter 5: Discussions**

### **Introduction**

Little evidence exists linking postsecondary outcomes of special education graduates to their secondary transition plans, resulting in few comparisons between the intended postsecondary transition goals (Indicator 13) to the actual postsecondary outcomes (Indicator 14). The purpose of this research was to determine whether a loop existed in linking the secondary transition plans to the postsecondary outcomes of the special education graduates and in linking the feedback from the graduates' postsecondary outcomes back to the transition plans. The purpose of the study also was to determine how effective the loop was in informing transition practices at the secondary level if the loop in fact existed. The loop consisted of systematic assessments of the quality of secondary transition plans along with curriculum alignment. A direct connection between the input of Indicator 13 and the output of Indicator 14 as well as systematic follow-up to determine the short-term and long-term effects of the link between Indicator 13 and Indicator 14 also made up the loop.

This chapter addresses the results of the four prescribed research questions in determining whether or not the loop existed as well as what conclusions, implications, and recommendations can be drawn from the study based on the findings.

### **Conclusions**

Four research questions were formulated to guide this study, and based on the findings I arrived at several conclusions. First of all, I can conclude that the quality of the transitional planning process in the site selected for the study can be described as inadequate. The results of the teacher surveys, parent surveys, administrator surveys, and postsecondary mentor surveys suggested that the secondary transition planning process



fell short of preparing the special education graduates for meeting postsecondary challenges and finding postsecondary success. For example, the study revealed that of six graduates who received OCS diplomas, only two had successful postsecondary outcomes and one of the two was aligned with the intended postsecondary goals of the transition plan while the other one was outside of the intended goals of the plan. One of the postsecondary mentors reported that one of the OCS graduates was interested in joining the military as the transition plan stated but the intellectual and physical disabilities of the graduate made that goal unrealistic. In situations like this, school administrators and teachers should thoroughly address the impact of such unrealistic goals with the parents during the secondary transition planning meetings. It is also important for postsecondary mentors such as vocational rehabilitation counselors to be a part of the secondary transition planning meetings so that they can enlighten parents and school personnel about the negative impact of unrealistic postsecondary goals. Another OCS graduate had a goal of attending a 4-year university to become a teacher which was also an unrealistic goal because the OCS does not include classes that prepare students for the university track after high school. Therefore, the long-term effects of the link between Indicator 13 and Indicator 14 suggest that the majority of the students with less than adequate transition plans do not successfully achieve the intended postsecondary goals of the plans.

Several of the other secondary transition plans were incomplete, leaving out the intended postsecondary goals of the students and the curriculum alignment which may have contributed to the lack of postsecondary success. The administrator surveys often suggested that the administrators were somewhat aware of the secondary transition planning process of the students but mostly relied on the teachers to handle the process.

The parents did not seem to think that the secondary transition planning process influenced the postsecondary outcomes of their children or that they received much help from the teachers or postsecondary mentors in working towards achieving the postsecondary goals of their children. However, in comparing and relating the qualitative and quantitative data through convergent design, the transition plans and teacher surveys indicated that teachers viewed the quality of their transition plans in higher regard than the assessed results of the plans, which indicated that most of the plans were of poor quality in meeting the established set of criteria. When asked if the transition plans met the requirements of Indicator 13 under the IDEA (2004) federal law, which was also used to establish some of the external criteria for assessing the plans, the teachers overwhelming chose a rating of 4 or 5, indicating that the transition plans frequently or almost always met the requirements of Indicator 13 even though most of the plans were poorly written based on the assessment scale used in the study.

The assessment of the transition plans indicate that the plans were not well written and the total mean rating of the plans was an 8.89 of a possible 25 and the total mean of the criteria was 1.78 of a possible 5. All of the transition plans fell within the scoring range of 7-12 which made them poor or moderate based on the transition assessment scale used for the study, meaning that they were not sound plans based on the literary criteria and that systematic assessments of the quality of the plans did not occur at the secondary level. Even if the lowest score and highest score were taken out of the total mean rating, the mean score for the transition plans would be 8.86, which still equates to a rating of poor on the transition rating scale. This is very unnerving because federal and state mandates require that special education students engage in secondary transition planning activities that facilitate their movement into postsecondary success and all

students are entitled to sufficient skills to successfully engage in postsecondary education and employment (IDEA, 1990, 2004; *Leandro v. State*, 1997). Therefore, most of the secondary transition plans proved to be merely written as pro forma.

Where curriculum alignment was concerned, the results indicated that the curriculum alignment results were mixed and bordered on ineffective. I formed this conclusion because although curriculum alignment of the plan's intended outcomes to the students' program of studies while in high school was prevalent in that many of the plans (43.6%) included coursework aligned with the postsecondary goals of the students, the majority of the plans (56.4%) did not align with the postsecondary goals of the students or even contain self-advocacy instruction. There was also no evidence of systemic assessment of the curriculum alignment with the intended outcomes which may have attributed to the fact that many of the graduates did not successfully fulfill their intended postsecondary outcomes. It is worth noting that the teachers overwhelmingly agreed that the transition plans of the graduates met the requirements of Indicator 13 which states that transition plans must include an appropriate course of study to prepare students for meeting their postsecondary goals (IDEA, 2004).

Interestingly, the teachers overwhelmingly felt that the curriculum and instruction that the graduates received while in high school prepared the students for meeting postsecondary challenges. When responding to the question regarding whether the secondary transition plan included curriculum and instruction alignment that reasonably enabled the graduates to meet their postsecondary goals, the teachers overwhelming responded with a rating of 4 or 5, meaning that the transition plans frequently, always, or almost always included curriculum alignment that prepared the graduates for meeting postsecondary challenges. The administrators appeared not very aware of the Indicator

13 requirement of curriculum alignment with postsecondary goals and tended to rely on the teachers to take care of anything dealing with the IEP and transition process. The majority of the parents and teachers both agreed that the curriculum did not include an adequate amount of self-advocacy and self-determination instruction to help the graduates in meeting postsecondary challenges. In examining the curriculum alignment of the secondary transition plans against the parent survey responses regarding the graduates' current situations, many of the graduates followed paths unrelated to the curriculum design outlined in their plan. Of all of the secondary transition plans that included curriculum alignment (some of the transition plans were incomplete), only six graduates of the 24 whose parents chose to participate in the study were currently pursuing the postsecondary goals that aligned with the curriculum design of their secondary transition plans. Research indicates that the curriculum design in transition plans should align with students' postsecondary goals and that students should also receive instruction in self-determination and self-advocacy skills so that their transition from high school will be more effective (Clark & Unruh, 2010; Lindstrom et al., 2007; Martin et al., 2006). Based on the parent and guardian surveys, 95.8% of the participants responded "no" to the question "during high school did your child participate in any self-determination or self-advocacy instruction." Therefore, the results of the study suggest that the implementation of the curriculum design aligned with the transition plans failed in helping to prepare the special education graduates while they were in high school for meeting postsecondary challenges.

However, many parents did not feel that the curriculum design aligned with the transition plans prepared their children for postsecondary challenges even if their children received the curriculum and instruction that aligned with their transition plan while in

high school. Overwhelmingly, 91.7% of the parents indicated that their child took career preparation courses while in high school. However, when provided a checklist of postsecondary challenges to check off how well their child was prepared to meet such challenges while in high school, only 16.7% of the parents felt that their child was somewhat prepared, and 66.7% did not check off anything on the list. Only 8.3% of the parents felt that their child was very prepared for meeting the listed postsecondary challenges, and 8.3% did not feel that their child was prepared at all. Curriculum alignment is one of the key best practices to facilitate successful transitions from the high school environment to postsecondary environments. Where this alignment is lacking, those deficits can only put special education students in a worse predicament than they may already be in.

Where the interactions between adults who ostensibly form the support system for these students are concerned, I found a lack of collaboration, a lack of willingness to meet to identify and solve common problems or even to ask questions whose answers might serve the needs of the students better. The fact that the majority of the parents indicated that they received little help from teachers and postsecondary mentors in helping their children with their intended postsecondary goals and half of the postsecondary mentors indicated that they were not a part of the secondary transition planning process of the graduates that they currently work with indicated that the short-term effects of not properly carrying out the secondary transition planning process (Indicator 13) led to shortcomings in accomplishing the goals of Indicator 14.

In comparing the results of the teacher surveys to the transition plans written by the teachers, the transition plans written by the few teachers who felt that they had some influence on the outcomes of the secondary transition planning process did not produce

more quality transition plans than the teachers who did not feel that they had any influence. Of the few teachers who reported that they felt that they had an influence on the transition planning process, two of those teachers reported that they follow-up with their graduates; and the same two teachers had written plans for two of the 10 graduates who were currently pursuing the intended postsecondary goals of their transition plans. The teachers in charge of the secondary transition planning process of the other eight graduates who were currently pursuing their intended postsecondary goals reported that they did not feel that they had an influence on the secondary transition planning process or the postsecondary outcomes of the graduates. The response theme of most of those teachers was that their influence was limited by the parents, over whom they had no control. One teacher stated, “for many of the kids their transition was planned out by them and their family and many of the transition planning meetings were not necessary.”

The results of the postsecondary mentor surveys suggested that the graduates received more assistance from the postsecondary mentors after graduating from high school than they did throughout the secondary transition planning process because the postsecondary mentors did not feel included or involved in the secondary transition planning process. However, the majority of the graduates with postsecondary mentors were unsuccessful in obtaining employment or higher education which are both used to determine success under the IDEA (2004). The graduates and their parents may have chosen to seek out postsecondary mentors after failing to find success on their own. According to the National Council on Disability (2011), the current climate of the economy has disproportionately contributed to the challenges of special education graduates in securing employment. Therefore, having a postsecondary mentor does not guarantee postsecondary success. More collaboration is needed amongst the adult

support system of special education students in order to better meet the postsecondary needs of the students once they graduate from high school.

Where postsecondary successes are concerned, there was an insufficient sample of data to make any meaningful conclusions. While there were some evidences of postsecondary successes, there were too many missing data points to make more definitive conclusions. The seven graduates who found postsecondary success outside the scope of their secondary transition plan indicated a direct connection between the poor planning of Indicator 13 and the unintended outcomes of Indicator 14 because, although the graduates had unintended successes, the poor secondary transition planning process (Indicator 13) of the graduates failed in producing the intended outcomes of Indicator 14. Such results revealed that a connection between Indicator 13 and Indicator 14 may exist but more teacher follow-up on the postsecondary outcomes of Indicator 14 is needed to determine the specifics of the connection. The facts that less than half of the graduates (41.7%) with corresponding parent surveys achieved the intended success of their secondary transition plan and the majority of the graduates (58.3%) found success outside the scope of the plan or no success at all indicated that the long-term effects of the link between Indicator 13 and Indicator 14 played some type of role in the postsecondary outcomes of students. More postsecondary follow-up practice is also needed from the teachers along with how they use the follow-up data in order to pinpoint more of an understanding of the short-term and long-term effects of Indicators 13 and 14.

## **Discussions**

It is quite apparent that adult collaboration was lacking in the secondary transition planning process and postsecondary process of the 2011 special education graduates. The parents often indicated that they felt left to fend for themselves when it came to

helping their children transition into the postsecondary environment. Many of the parents felt that they were able to collaborate with teachers during the secondary transition planning process but felt abandoned once their children graduated from high school. Most of the teachers agreed that they did not play a major role in the transition of the students after high school graduation because the parents took charge of the process. The administrators often were not fully informed of the transition process and often left the process up to the teachers, leaving them little room to collaborate in the secondary or postsecondary transition process. However, the administrators appeared disinclined to become better informed about the transition process, allowing the teachers to operate without regard to oversight or accountability for the quality of their practice. Although some of the graduates had postsecondary mentors, the parents did not view the mentors as a tremendous help in helping their children obtain postsecondary success. However, the postsecondary mentors felt that they were more instrumental in the postsecondary transition process than the secondary transition planning process. The data revealed an obvious lack of communication and collaboration amongst the adult support system of the special education graduates, which is detrimental to the students.

The lack of data from the teachers on the use of postsecondary follow-up information made it difficult for me to determine the short-term or long-term effects of the link between Indicators 13 and 14. However, the data confirming that only 10 of the graduates were currently pursuing the intended postsecondary goals of their secondary transition plans indicated that a direct connection linking the input of Indicator 13 to the output Indicator 14 may exist as well as have long-term effects. In examining the connection between Indicators 13 and 14 of the seven graduates who did not find any postsecondary success, many of the unsuccessful graduates had unrealistic secondary



transition plans (Indicator 13) that were beyond their capabilities, which made postsecondary success (Indicator 14) unattainable. The results of this study suggest that the secondary transition planning process played a limited role in the postsecondary successes of the students which may be attributed to the missing ingredients in the loop, such as little to no follow-up by the teachers with the special education students after graduation to help inform and improve the secondary transition planning process.

In comparing the postsecondary follow-up results of the teachers and postsecondary mentors, the postsecondary mentors followed up with the graduates more frequently than the teachers. According to the surveys, the postsecondary mentors followed up with the graduates on average once a month to a year and the majority of the teachers reported never following up with the graduates, although a few reported following up through hearsay and phone calls. The postsecondary mentors reported using follow-up results to discuss the graduates' progress with them and the direction that the graduates need to take in order to be successful. Of the few teachers who reported that they followed up with the graduates, none of them provided information on how they utilized the follow-up data.

Although 17 of 24 of the graduates who had corresponding parent surveys found some type of postsecondary success according to the guidelines of the IDEA (2004), seven of those successes were unrelated to the transition plans and seven other graduates had not reached any postsecondary success at the time of this study. Therefore, implementing the following missing ingredients to the loop such as (1) systematic practice for assessing the quality of secondary transition plans along with curriculum alignment, (2) systematically following up with the connection between the input of Indicator 13 and the output of Indicator 14, and (3) in determining the short- and long-

term effects of the two indicators may improve the secondary transition planning process in leading to more intended postsecondary successes.

### **Implications for Practice**

Based on the findings, the implications for practice consist of the need to improve and possibly overhaul the secondary transition planning process through the establishment of a well-defined loop that links Indicator 13 to Indicator 14 and Indicator 14 back to Indicator 13. First of all, high school teachers and administrators need to establish and practice a better system for monitoring and accountability of the regulations of Indicators 13 and 14. They need to begin the postsecondary follow-up process with special education graduates and use the feedback to improve and inform the secondary transition planning process. High school teachers need to establish a systematic assessment of transition plans for quality and curriculum alignment. Another implication for practice is for improved collaboration during the secondary transition planning process between the teachers, administrators, parents, and postsecondary mentors that includes input from the students. Finally, school administrators need to become more aware of the service requirements for special education students and then improve their process for monitoring how those service requirements are working to benefit the students.

More collaboration amongst the adult support system of special education graduates also needs to take place during the postsecondary transition process so that graduates will have more support in achieving their intended postsecondary goals. School initiatives and outreach efforts are needed to ensure that parents are more aware and involved in the secondary transition planning process of their children so that they can make sure that their children are well prepared for meeting postsecondary challenges

and accomplishing postsecondary goals. Schools need to become better at setting the climate for a collaborative environment so that parents are not afraid to ask questions during the secondary transition planning process and feel comfortable in requesting more assistance from high school staff and postsecondary mentors during the postsecondary transition process. It is critical that everyone involved in the transition of special education students from high school to adult life join together to improve the reprehensible act of what is currently being passed off as transition plans.

### **Conceptual Framework Findings**

Based on the results of the study, the conceptual framework for secondary transition planning and postsecondary outcomes would prove more effective with the addition of program improvement and assessment outcomes. The diagram below represents the altered conceptual framework based on the Kohler (1996) model with solid lines around the assessment of outcomes and program improvement instead of the previous broken lines referred to in the proposed framework in Chapter 1.

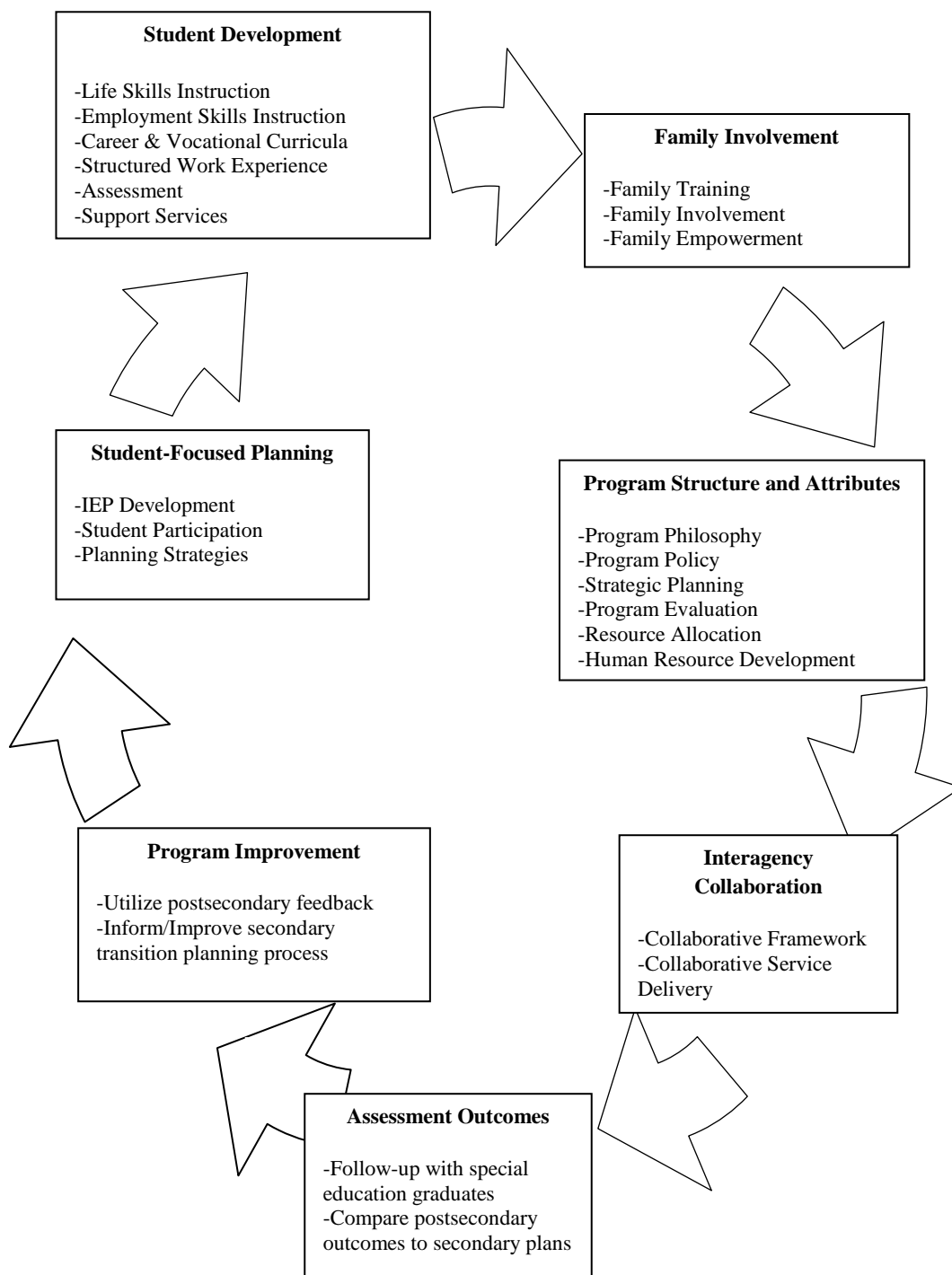


Figure 7. Modified Conceptual Framework.

The original Kohler (1996) model proved effective in this study because the results of the surveys and transition plans demonstrated that student development, family involvement, student-focused planning, program structure and attributes, and interagency collaboration did occur some of the time for some of the students during the secondary transition planning process even though the results did not demonstrate that any components of the Kohler (1996) model occurred often.

However, the fact that little follow-up from school staff occurred regarding postsecondary outcomes and the fact that the teachers did not consistently utilize any follow-up data to inform improvements to the secondary transition planning process presented cause for me to modify the original conceptual framework to include the assessment of outcomes and program improvement. Therefore, the study suggests that (1) following up with special education graduates, (2) comparing postsecondary outcomes to secondary transition plans through assessing outcomes, (3) and utilizing postsecondary feedback to inform and improve secondary transition planning through program improvement is missing from the loop in linking the secondary transition plan to the postsecondary outcomes. The loop is also missing the linking of postsecondary outcomes back to the transition plans so that the postsecondary follow-up data can be used to adjust and improve the transition planning process in the secondary setting. The results, reflecting a lack of postsecondary follow-up by the teachers, emphasized the need to adapt the conceptual framework to incorporate the use of follow-up postsecondary data to inform and improve the secondary transition planning process so that more students can find postsecondary success within the scope of their transition plans.

The study also revealed that regular and systematic follow-up to determine short-term or long-term effects of the link between Indicators 13 and 14 and a direct connection

linking the input of Indicator 13 to the output of Indicator 14 did not occur according to the survey results. Although “program evaluation” and “strategic planning” are a part of the Kohler (1996) taxonomy under the “program structure and attributes” component, utilizing postsecondary feedback for program improvement once the program has been evaluated is not present in the original conceptual framework of the Kohler (1996) model. Also, the use of assessments such as transition assessments under “student development” should be utilized to assess the actual abilities of students and steer students away from unrealistic postsecondary goals. Transition assessments should also be revisited under “assessment outcomes” to ensure that the transition assessments serve their intended purpose in preparing students for postsecondary success. Therefore, the adaptation of the Kohler (1996) model as the conceptual framework for the purpose of this study proves beneficial in establishing a link between the secondary transition planning process (Indicator 13) and the postsecondary outcomes (Indicator 14).

### **Limitations**

Several of the teachers were responsible for writing more than one of the secondary transition plans which led to many students having identical transition plans. This also led to identical teacher survey responses. Also, all of the postsecondary mentors were local vocational rehabilitation counselors in which a small staff of counselors served the majority of the graduates who reportedly had postsecondary mentors. This meant that many of the postsecondary surveys were filled out by the same people which led to some identical survey responses as well. All of the transition plans were written using a required computer program format that was used by the school district, in which the teachers had to fill in the required blanks. However, the format included all of the federal requirements under the IDEA (2004) of what a secondary

transition plan should consist of to guide the teachers in writing the transition plans.

The population that was focused on in this study was very transient, and eight of the parents of the 2011 special education graduates could not be located to be asked to participate in the study. Some of the students were not United States citizens, which affected their ability to receive services from postsecondary mentors such as vocational rehabilitation counselors, competitive employment, and access to affordable postsecondary education. The special education graduates that the study referred to were diagnosed with a wide range of disabilities from mild to severe which impacted the range of postsecondary possibilities for some of the graduates. One of the graduates aged out of the special education program and only graduated with a certificate of completion instead of a high school diploma and was still working on a General Equivalency Diploma (GED) at the time of this study, which made it extremely difficult to find employment or to attend a postsecondary institution of higher learning.

### **Recommendations**

For future research, I recommend extending the study to include more than one high school and more than one school district so that the results may be generalized to other special education high school graduates. I also recommend examining the transcripts of the graduates because, even though many of the secondary transition plans included coursework that aligned with the postsecondary goals of the special education graduates, the study did not examine whether the graduates were or were not actually successful in the courses which could have played a role in whether the graduates successfully attained the intended postsecondary outcomes of their transition plans. It would also be interesting to continue this study by interviewing the graduates to find out their perspectives on their secondary transition planning process and whether they chose

not to pursue their intended postsecondary goals because they changed their minds after high school or whether the goals were too difficult to attain due to lack of support or lack of effort.

### **Summary**

The results of the research questions surrounding the quality of the secondary transition plans, the curriculum alignment of the transition plans, the perceived influences of the adults, and the postsecondary successes that occurred outside the scope of the transition plans support the need for a strong loop in improving the secondary transition planning process for special education students. Despite the fact that 17 of 24 of the 2011 special education graduates reported on achieved postsecondary success as defined under Indicator 14 in the IDEA (2004), only 10 of those successes were within the realm of the intended postsecondary goals of the secondary transition plans. The fact is that the majority of the transition plans were “cookie cutter” plans often written by the same few teachers with very little individuality for the diverse needs of the students. Federal laws such as the IDEA (1990), the Education of All Children Handicapped Act, the Rehabilitation Act, and the Americans with Disabilities Act were all aimed at providing people with disabilities with equal opportunities to education and employment (Stodden, 2005). Other federal laws like the Perkins Act (2006) parallel the importance of successful postsecondary outcomes and the need to follow-up with graduates. Under the Perkins Act (2006), schools are required to follow-up with all of the graduates who concentrate in at least four CTE courses. State laws such as *Leandro v. State* (1997) stress the rights of students to graduate from high school with skills that allow them to successfully engage in postsecondary education and employment. Despite such laws, special education graduates continue to face significant challenges when it comes to



postsecondary success in the areas of employment, education, and independent living (Barber, 2012). Unfortunately, it seems that no serious attention was taken by the high school staff or postsecondary mentors to ensure the possible success of the school's most vulnerable citizens. High school administrators need to become more responsible in the oversight of their special education teachers and ensure that they are going beyond mere compliance of the laws when it comes to generating and implementing secondary transition planning. The secondary and postsecondary transition process is a major milestone in the lives of special education students who rely heavily on the expertise of their adult support system to help them overcome postsecondary challenges and obtain postsecondary success. Therefore, passing off subpar transition plans is unacceptable, and parents have the right to demand more collaboration from high school staff and postsecondary mentors in ensuring their children's success. If not, the secondary transition planning process will continue to fail to produce intended postsecondary outcomes and special education students, who often need the most assistance, will suffer the most.

The results of this study suggest that several key components are missing from the loop of linking secondary transition planning to postsecondary outcomes and using the feedback from postsecondary outcomes to inform the secondary transition planning process. The only key component that the research supported the existence of was that many of the plans, although not the majority, included alignment of the curriculum with the intended postsecondary outcomes of the transition plans. However, there was no evidence of systemic assessment of the curriculum alignment with the postsecondary goals. Also, evidence of curriculum alignment alone did not prove beneficial in preparing the graduates for meeting postsecondary challenges and attaining

postsecondary success. Without the combination of all of the components such as (1) systematic assessment of the transition plans, (2) systemic assessment of curriculum alignment of the postsecondary goals, (3) a direct connection of Indicators 13 to 14, (4) short-term and long-term effects of the connection between Indicators 13 and 14, (5) and the systematic practice of using postsecondary data to improve secondary transition planning to complete the loop, the adapted conceptual framework for this study will be ineffective.

Therefore, in order for secondary transition planning to fulfill its intended purpose and work the way that the laws intended, school administrators will need to begin to put a defined systematic practice in place for following up with special education graduates and not rely so heavily on teachers to automatically perform such practices without leadership guidance. Teachers will also need to stop viewing the transition planning process as limited and unnecessary and adhere to the practice of following up with the graduates and utilizing the follow-up data to make improvements to the secondary transition planning process so that more graduates will find postsecondary success within the reasonable intended outcomes of their transition plans. The fact that the study found no evidence that a complete loop existed in linking the input of Indicator 13 to the output of Indicator 14 and Indicator 14 back to Indicator 13 to improve the entire transition process is cause for alarm. Unlike their regular education peers, special education students are limited in their postsecondary options, and writing their future off as just a compliance requirement with little effort and passion is an outrage. Until the adult support system of special education students (parents, special education teachers, secondary administrators, and postsecondary mentors) come together in collaboration to best serve the needs of the students, the loop will continue to be virtually nonexistent or

incomplete, leading to continuous postsecondary upsets for some of the most vulnerable students.

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Appendix A  
Parent Survey

**Post-School Outcomes Parent Survey****Confidential****Directions**

Thank-you for taking the time to complete this survey. Your answers will help improve the quality of secondary transition planning for special education students. Your name will not appear in any report and your responses will remain anonymous. This is a 13 question front and back survey about the employment, postsecondary education, independent living, and high school experiences of your child. You have the right to refuse to answer any particular questions.

Again, thank-you for taking the time to complete this survey. When you finish the survey, please return it as soon as you can in the postage-paid envelope you received with the survey by \_\_\_\_\_, 2012.

**1. Is your child currently competitively employed? (Circle One)**

Yes or No

**2. What type of school or training program does your child currently attend? (Check One)**

Vocational technical training	
Community education classes	
Two-year community college	
Four-year college or university	
Compensatory education program	
Day habilitation services	
Other: <b>(Please Specify)</b>	

**3. Describe your child's current living arrangement. (Check One)**

Alone	
Alone, with support	
With spouse or significant other	
With a roommate	
With family (e.g. parents, grandparents, siblings, aunt/uncle)	
In a residential living facility or boarding school	
In a group home, assisted living center or other supervised living arrangement	
On a military base	
On a college campus	
Other: <b>(Please Specify)</b>	

**4. Did your child take any career preparation courses in high school? (Check All That Apply)**

Computer applications	
Cosmetology	
Child development	
Home and consumer science	
Carpentry	
Welding	
Automotive	
Graphic design & digital publishing	
Journalism	
Other: <b>(Please Specify)</b>	

**5. Did your child receive any self-care or independent living instruction when he/she was in high school (e.g. grooming, money management, community experiences, etc.)? (Circle One)**

Yes or No

**6. During high school did your child participate in any self-determination or self-advocacy instruction? (Circle One)**

Yes or No

**7. When your child left high school, did he/she have a detailed plan about what he/she planned to do when he/she left school? (Circle One)**

Yes or No

**8. Describe how well you feel high school prepared your child for each of the following?**

	Very well prepared	Somewhat prepared	Not prepared
Reading for daily living (e.g. on the job, newspaper)			
Doing math for daily living (e.g. on the job, my bank account, etc.)			
Making friends			
Decision making			
Asking for help from others to achieve your goals			
Taking care of his/her mental or physical health			
Having skills to live on his/her own			
Voting in elections			
Handling money			
Finding work			
Interviewing for a job			
Applying for postsecondary education			
Attending postsecondary education			
Participating in community recreation activities			

**9. Prior to graduation, was your child referred to any adult service/community agencies such as Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), Mental Health, etc.?**

Yes or No

**10. Does your child have a postsecondary mentor or community agency representative?**

Yes or No

**11. What role do you feel secondary transition planning played in the postsecondary outcomes of your child?****12. Describe your experience and participation with the teachers and community agency representatives/postsecondary mentors in your child's secondary IEP transition planning process?****13. Is there any additional information that you would like to share?**

*Adopted from the National Post-School Outcomes Center "Post-School Data Collection Question Bank"*

Appendix B  
Administrator Survey

**Administrator Awareness Transition Survey****Confidential****Directions**

Thank-you for taking the time to complete this survey. Your answers will help improve the quality of secondary transition planning for special education students. Your name will not appear in any report and your responses will remain anonymous. This is a 6 question survey about your awareness of the secondary transition process of the 2011 special education students at your high school. You have the right to refuse to answer any particular questions.

Again, thank-you for taking the time to complete this survey. When you finish the survey, please return it as soon as you can in the envelope you received with the survey by \_\_\_\_\_, 2012.

For questions 1 to 6, answer each question using the rating scale below to circle the number that best answers the question.

**1= Not at all aware, 2=Slightly aware, 3=Somewhat aware, 4=Moderately aware, 5=Extremely aware**

1. To your knowledge, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires all students with an IEP to have a full transition plan in place by age 16.

**1      2      3      4      5**

2. To your knowledge, Indicator 13 under IDEA requires students 16 and above to have appropriate measurable postsecondary goals in alignment with the curriculum updated annually on their transition plan to help them meet their postsecondary aspirations.

**1      2      3      4      5**

3. To your knowledge, Indicator 14 under IDEA requires school districts to follow-up on the percentage of students with Individual Education Plans (IEP) who are no longer in high school and are competitively employed /enrolled in a postsecondary institution within one year of leaving high school.

**1      2      3      4      5**

4. To your knowledge, teachers utilize feedback from the postsecondary outcomes of special education graduates to inform and improve the secondary transition process.

**1      2      3      4      5**

5. To your knowledge, teachers receive consistent training or staff development about the secondary transition planning process.

**1      2      3      4      5**

6. To your knowledge, teachers receive consistent training or staff development on how to adequately prepare students for postsecondary success.

**1      2      3      4      5**

Appendix C  
Teacher Survey



**Secondary Transition Teacher Survey****Confidential****Directions**

Thank-you for taking the time to complete this survey. Your answers will help improve the quality of secondary transition planning for special education students. Your name will not appear in any report and your responses will remain anonymous. This is a 13 question front and back survey about the student secondary transition planning process for 2011 special education graduates. You have the right to refuse to answer any particular questions.

Again, thank-you for taking the time to complete this survey. When you finish the survey, please return it as soon as you can in the envelope you received with the survey by \_\_\_\_\_, 2012.

For questions 1 to10, answer each question using the rating scale below to circle the number that best answers the question. Please write in responses for 11-13.

**1= never or almost never, 2=occasionally, 3=half the time, 4=frequently, 5=always or almost always**

1. Did the IEP transition plan include appropriate measurable postsecondary goals that cover education or training, competitive employment, and independent living, self-determination, and community experiences?

**1            2            3            4            5**

2. Did the IEP transition plan include postsecondary goals that were updated annually with the input and collaboration of parents?

**1            2            3            4            5**

3. Did the IEP transition plan include measurable postsecondary goals that were based on age-appropriate transition assessments?

**1            2            3            4            5**

4. Did the IEP transition plan include transition services that reasonably enabled the student to meet his or her postsecondary goals such as school-to-work programs, competitive employment preparation, etc.?

**1            2            3            4            5**

5. Did the IEP transition plan include transition services that included curriculum and instruction that reasonably enabled the student to meet his or her postsecondary goals?

**1            2            3            4            5**

6. Did the IEP transition plan include annual IEP goal(s) related to the student's postsecondary goals/transition services needs?

**1            2            3            4            5**

7. Did you collaborate with the parents and students in writing the postsecondary goals of the student?

**1            2            3            4            5**

8. Is there evidence that the student was invited to the IEP team transition planning meeting?

**1            2            3            4            5**

9. Is there evidence that a representative of any participating agency was invited to the IEP Team transition meeting with the prior consent of the parent or student who has reached the age of majority?

**1            2            3            4            5**

10. Overall, did the student's last written IEP meet the requirements of Indicator 13?

**1            2            3            4            5**

11. What role do you feel secondary transition planning played in the postsecondary outcomes of the student?

12. How did your attitudes and perceptions of the student's capabilities impact the postsecondary goals of the student?

13. How do you follow-up with the postsecondary outcomes of the student and how do you utilize the follow-up results?

14. Is there any additional information that you would like to share?

*Adopted from the National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center and Data Accountability Center "Tool for Collecting Quality Data for Indicator B-13"*

Appendix D  
Postsecondary Mentor Survey

**Postsecondary Mentor Survey****Confidential****Directions**

Thank-you for taking the time to complete this survey. Your answers will help improve the quality of secondary transition planning for special education students. Your name will not appear in any report and your responses will remain anonymous. This is a 16 question front and back survey about your work with individual 2011 special education graduates from said high school. You have the right to refuse to answer any particular questions.

Again, thank-you for taking the time to complete this survey. When you finish the survey, please return it as soon as you can in the postage-paid envelope you received with the survey by \_\_\_\_\_, 2012.

These items address the extent and importance of specific transition services. Items should be answered from the respondent's perspective.

For questions 1 to 13, answer each question using the rating scale below to circle the number that best answers the question. Please write in responses for 14-16.

**1= never or almost never, 2=occasionally, 3=half the time, 4=frequently, 5=always or almost always**

1. You participated in an IEP/transition plan for the graduate before the individual completed high school.

**1          2          3          4          5**

2. You communicated with local education agency personnel to discuss helpful approaches and strategies for the graduate.

**1          2          3          4          5**

3. You provided career counseling and guidance services to the graduate.

**1          2          3          4          5**

4. You conducted or sponsored appropriate transition/vocational assessments to determine the service needs of the graduate in the areas of postsecondary education and employment.

**1          2          3          4          5**

5. You participated in supporting the graduate in work-based learning, career and technical education, and other vocational services.

**1          2          3          4          5**

6. You arranged for participation of the graduate in unpaid work experiences.

**1          2          3          4          5**

7. You arranged for the participation of the graduate in paid work experiences.

**1          2          3          4          5**

8. You advised local education agency staff to help them determine the accommodations and the assistive technology needed by the graduate while the individual was still in high school, in order to achieve postsecondary education and/or employment goals.

**1          2          3          4          5**

9. You arranged for job coaches and other resources needed for the graduate to participate in community-based employment.

1            2            3            4            5

10. You provided support to the graduate in postsecondary education after exiting high school (for example by providing supports related to transportation, tuition, books, dormitory costs, assistive technology, personal counseling, professional tutoring, job coaching and job development).

1            2            3            4            5

11. You provided support to the graduate to participate in vocational training (e.g. by providing supports related to transportation, tuition, books, dormitory costs, assistive technology, personal counseling, professional tutoring, job coaching and job development).

1            2            3            4            5

12. You follow-up on the graduate who has moved on to postsecondary education or employment and connect him/her with resources when appropriate.

1            2            3            4            5

13. You facilitated placement of the graduate in employment and training prior to high school graduation, with plans for post-graduation follow-up.

1            2            3            4            5

14. What role do you feel secondary transition planning played in the postsecondary outcomes of the graduate?

15. How do you follow-up with the postsecondary outcomes of the graduate and how do you utilize the follow-up results?

16. Is there any additional information that you would like to share?

*Adopted from the Rehabilitation Services Administration "National Study of Transition Policies and Practices in State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies"*

## Appendix E

### Permission to Use the National Post-School Outcomes Center Instrument

From: D [REDACTED] [REDACTED]@uoregon.edu> |

To: Vickie Miller [REDACTED]@juno.com>

Re: Post-school data survey

Date: Wed, Aug 22, 2012 12:28 PM

Hi Vickie: My apologies for the delay....I received this while on the road...and then the email got buried. Yes, please feel free to utilize a portion or all of the survey; just make sure you cite its origin.... :)

Thanks.

D [REDACTED]

~~~~~  
D [REDACTED], Ph.D.

[REDACTED]  
University of Oregon  
[REDACTED]

**National Post-School Outcomes Center**

<http://www.psocenter.org/>

**Secondary Special Education & Transition Research Unit**

<http://sset.uoregon.edu/>

On Wed, Aug 1, 2012 at 5:04 PM, [REDACTED]@juno.com wrote:

Hello,

My name is Vickie Miller and I am a doctoral student at Gardner Webb University. I am writing my dissertation on the effectiveness of secondary transition planning on the postsecondary outcomes of students and I would like to use and adapt parts of your Post-School Data Collection Question Bank to administer to parents of special education graduates as a part of my study. Your permission to use and adapt parts of this survey for my study would be greatly appreciated and of course I will credit the work of the National Post-School Outcomes Center in my study.

Thank-you for your consideration,

Vickie Miller

## Appendix F

Permission to Use the National Study of Transition Policies and Practices in State  
Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies Instrument



From: J [REDACTED]@umn.edu>

To: Vickie Miller [REDACTED]@juno.com"

Re: National Study of Transition...

Date: Thu, Aug 02, 2012 07:08 AM

Hello Vicki,

I am one of the authors of the Project Report. I am sure we would have no problem with you referring to the study or using data from it. I would like to tell you some things about the back story of the study. If you could call me sometime, I would be happy to share this information.

Thanks.

J [REDACTED]

University of Minnesota

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

College Prep/ICI [www.ici.umn.edu/collegeprep](http://www.ici.umn.edu/collegeprep)

*Strategic Ideation Individualization Empathy Input*

On Wed, Aug 1, 2012 at 7:17 PM, [REDACTED]@juno.com > wrote:

Hello,

My name is Vickie Miller and I am a doctoral student at Gardner Webb University. I am writing my dissertation on the effectiveness of secondary transition planning on the postsecondary outcomes of students and I would like to use and adapt parts of section D transition services in your National Study of Transition Policies and Practices in State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies survey to administer to postsecondary mentors such as VR counselor of special education graduates as a part of my study. Your permission to use and adapt section D of this survey for my study would be greatly appreciated and of course I will credit the work of the Rehabilitation Services Administration, U.S. Department of Education in my study.

Thank-you for your consideration,

Vickie Miller

## Appendix G

### Permission to Use the I-13 IEP Compliance Feedback Form Instrument

From: [REDACTED], B [REDACTED] [REDACTED]@cde.state.co.us

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To: "[REDACTED]@juno.com"

---

RE: I-13 IEP Compliance Feedback Form

---

Date: Thu, Aug 02, 2012 08:52 AM

Vickie,

You can absolutely use and adapt the materials that are available on our website. We simply ask that you do give us credit. Thanks, and I'm glad that you are able to find our materials useful.

B [REDACTED]

**From:** [REDACTED]@juno.com  
**Sent:** Wednesday, August 01, 2012 6:53 PM  
**To:** [REDACTED], B [REDACTED]  
**Subject:** I-13 IEP Compliance Feedback Form

Hello,

My name is Vickie Miller and I am a doctoral student at Gardner Webb University. I am writing my dissertation on the effectiveness of secondary transition planning on the postsecondary outcomes of students and I would like to use and adapt your I-13 IEP Compliance Feedback Form as a survey to administer to special education teachers as a part of my study. Your permission to use and adapt the form for my study would be greatly appreciated and of course I will credit your work in my study.

Thank-you for your consideration,

Vickie Miller

Appendix H  
Consent Form

*Parent/Guardian, Teacher, Administrator, and Postsecondary Mentor Consent Form*

**Title:** The Quality and Effects of Secondary Transition Plans on Special Education Graduates' Postsecondary Outcomes and their Effects on Secondary Transition

You are invited to participate in a brief survey exercise, which will assist with Vickie Miller's doctoral research. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a parent/guardian, former teacher, former administrator, or current mentor of a 2011 special education graduate who had an IEP and received transition services. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before accepting this invitation to participate in this study.

Vickie Miller, a doctoral candidate at Gardner Webb University, will conduct this study.

**Purpose of Study:**

The purpose of this research study is to determine the relationship between the secondary transition plans of students with disabilities and their postsecondary outcomes. The study seeks to develop a deeper understanding of the effectiveness of secondary transition plans on postsecondary success for students with disabilities. An additional purpose is to gain an understanding of the perceptions of parents/guardians, teachers, administrators, and mentors and the impact they may have on the preparation of students for life after high school.

**Procedures:**

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to answer a brief series of closed-ended and open-ended questions on a brief survey that will be mailed to you. A self-addressed stamped envelope will be provided to you for return of the surveys.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Your participation in this exercise is strictly voluntary. If you choose to participate, you may stop at any time without any penalty. You may also choose not to answer particular questions that are asked in the study.

**Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**

There are no risks associated with participating in this study. The benefits are the opportunity to state your perspectives and know that you are positively contributing to the research, which will improve secondary transition services. You may refuse to answer any questions you consider invasive or stressful and you may withdraw from the study at any time.

**Compensation:**

There will be no monetary compensation provided for your participation in this study nor is there any cost to you for participating in this study.

**Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept private and anonymous. In any report of this study that might be published or presented, no information will be used to identify you. Research records will be coded by numbers and kept in a locked file, and only I will have access to the records.

**Contacts and Questions:**

The student conducting this exercise is Vickie Miller. The student's Chairman is Dr. Ken Jenkins, who may be reached by email at [kjenkins@gardner-webb.edu](mailto:kjenkins@gardner-webb.edu). If you have questions, you may contact Vickie Miller at [vmiller2@gardner-webb.edu](mailto:vmiller2@gardner-webb.edu).

*If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact:*

*Office for Institutional Research  
Gardner Webb University  
110 South Main Street  
P.O. Box 997  
Boiling Springs, NC 280178  
Telephone: 704-486-4000*

### **CONSENT**

*I have been given the chance to read this consent form. I understand the information about this study. Questions that I wanted to ask about the study have been answered. My signature says that I am willing to participate in this study. I will receive a copy of the consent form once I have agreed to participate.*

Participant's name printed

Participant's signature/date

---



---

Researcher's name printed

Researcher's signature/date

---



---

### **Debriefing Statement**

Thank you for your participation in this research on the effects of the secondary transition planning process on the postsecondary outcomes of special education graduates and how to utilize feedback to improve secondary transition programs.

The goal of this research is to assess and examine the quality of the 2011 special education graduates' secondary transition plans, the curriculum alignment of the transition plans, the use of postsecondary feedback to improve the transition plans, the links between the input of Indicator 13 and the output of Indicator 14 under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) as well as the short-term and long-term effects of the links between Indicators 13 and 14.

The research questions are based on the quality of the secondary transition plan in meeting the proposed criteria for a sound plan, the implementation of the curriculum design aligned with the transition plan to help prepare special education students while they were in high school for meeting postsecondary challenges, the perceived influences that parents, teachers, administrators, and postsecondary mentors provided in the transitional planning process and their outcomes, and the postsecondary successes that occurred outside the scope of the secondary transition plan and what factors contributed to those successes.

During this research, you will be asked to complete open-ended and closed-ended survey questions to help answer research questions about the quality of the secondary transition plans, the curriculum that went along with the transition plan, your perceptions regarding the transition planning process and postsecondary outcomes, and the postsecondary successes of the special education graduates. No deception will be used in this study.

***Please return using the enclosed SASE.***